

JourneyForth Study Guide

This study guide is designed to help you think analytically about the content of the book. The questions that follow are open-ended, allowing you to discuss various topics and issues addressed in the novel. They cover four broad categories: character, plot, setting, and theme.

Children of the Storm

by Natasha Vins

a JourneyForth book © 2002 BJU Press

Introduction

The citizens of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, or Soviet Union, never had the freedoms and opportunities enjoyed by those living in free countries. Newspapers printed only what the Communist Party allowed. Those who disagreed with the government did not receive just and fair trials. The state religion was atheism, and anyone who worshipped any god at all was punished harshly.

In 1966 Leonid Brezhnev became General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party. To protect his position, he restored the Soviet secret police, the KGB, to its original power and status under Stalin. By 1971 Brezhnev controlled completely the Soviet government.

In foreign affairs, the Brezhnev Doctrine stated that the Soviet Union would use force to prevent the overthrow of another Communist regime. Brezhnev's government also funded expensive weapons and space programs. Although, in 1975, Brezhnev signed the Helsinki Final Act, an international agreement promising basic freedoms and respect for human rights including the freedom of religion, his government almost completely ignored the terms of the agreement. It is in Brezhnev's Soviet Union that Natasha Vins's story begins.

Concerning character

1. As Natasha and the other children in her youth group become teenagers, they struggle with their attitudes toward their persecutors and the police and often try to argue with them. But the pastor and Sunday school teachers encourage them to study "how Christ, the apostle Paul, and the New Testament church reacted to the enemies of the gospel" (p. 56). What did the teenagers' rebellion reveal about their character? How *should* they have responded? Give scripture verses to support your answer. (You may want to begin with Matthew 5 and 10, Philippians 1, and 1 Peter 4.)
2. On page 66, Natasha tells of the sneaky Shelya Abramovna, who attempts to win her over to the atheistic Communist Party and away from her Christian faith. Natasha says, "Even though in my heart I agreed with my teacher's arguments, during our discussions I would always defend Christians" (p. 67). How would you describe Natasha's character after this statement? Why do you think she continued to defend Christianity even if she didn't believe in it?

3. Describe Georgi Vins's behavior during his trial on January 27, 1975. For example, when the judge suggested a court-appointed lawyer, Georgi asked to dismiss the attorney and find one of his own (p. 107). How was (or wasn't) his situation and behavior similar to that in Matthew 10:17–23?
4. Review the story of Pavlik Morozov on pages 18–19. Discuss whether or not you think Pavlik was a hero and why.

Concerning plot

5. Many times in the plot of *Children of the Storm*, Georgi is persecuted, arrested, and ridiculed because of his faith. “During the crisis moments of imprisonment, when I was looking death in the eyes, . . . I didn't have the strength to take another step. . . . There was just a desperate cry in my heart, ‘Lord, help me! Give strength not to collapse!’ ” (pp. 72–73). Discuss several examples from the story in which God helped Georgi Vins. For example:

God helped Georgi by getting him out of Russia, where he was in exile in freezing Siberia, to the United States where he was able to preach and teach the gospel in freedom.

6. At what point in the plot does Natasha's childhood end and her adulthood begin (p. 6)?
7. Throughout grade school Natasha “was not ready to part with [her] dreams for the future. Making such a sacrifice for God's sake seemed too high a price” (p. 68). But at sixteen years old she accepts God's Son, Jesus Christ, as her Savior (pp. 74–75). Discuss some examples from the plot that depict how Natasha acted before and after her salvation. For example:

Before her salvation, Natasha wouldn't turn to Christianity because she was afraid embracing it would destroy her future hope for a university education and her desire to translate classic books into Russian. After becoming a Christian, she serves in an underground printing ministry where she considers God's work, rather than her own plans, to be the highest priority in her life (p.118).

8. A climax is the moment of highest tension or emotion in a story. After having read the book, what do you think is the climax of *Children of the Storm*? Was it Georgi's arrest, his trial, Natasha's salvation, or some other point in the story?

Concerning setting and historical context

9. A story's setting is the where and when of the story. One of the most important details of a setting is its atmosphere—the tone or mood. Natasha and her family endure many house searches and church service disruptions like the one she describes on page 22.

“Policemen beat the men and twisted their arms. They pushed around women and children. With my own eyes, I saw seventy-five-year-old Fanya Andreevnaget shoved so hard that her cane went flying to the side and she fell down. I ran to help her get up, but she could not because she was so badly injured.”

After reading this segment from the book, how would you describe the atmosphere of the scene?

10. After reading the book and the study guide introduction, why do you think the Communists wanted to abolish religion (and Christianity in particular)?
11. It is 1975 when Georgi's trial begins. The first part of his sentence (five years in prison) ends in 1979, but he must still serve five years in Siberian exile (p. 121). Consider the book's record of the rest of Papa's life spent in Russia (pp. 106–125) in light of the Helsinki Final Act of 1975 noted in the introduction. Do you think Brezhnev kept his promises? Support your conclusion. For example:

Brezhnev says he will respect the freedom of religion of all its people without distinction of religion, but Georgi is still sentenced to prison and exile for his belief in Christianity.

12. Discuss how Babushka's trial in chapter fourteen was conducted with respect to the following topics.
- The type of witnesses who were allowed in the courtroom
 - Babushka's inability to defend herself
 - The severity of the sentence
13. Several issues of mid-twentieth-century Russia addressed in *Children of the Storm* are still prevalent today. Two are listed below. For each one, provide examples found in the book and explain how it is relevant today.
- Removal of God from the school system
 - Challenges to the Bible's scientific and historical accuracy

Concerning tone and theme

14. For some time Natasha and the other children weren't allowed to attend church services with their parents. The Soviet government had already made laws stating that no churches could meet and hold worship services or preach the gospel. "Unfortunately," says Georgi, "these regulations were made by church leaders who gave in to pressure from the atheistic authorities. But when the church submits to such unbiblical demands, it disobeys the Lord's commandments"(p. 6). Do you agree with him? Should Christian parents have obeyed the Lord's commands and taken their children to church against the law or kept them at home to protect them from government officials? Support your answer with Scripture. (You may want to begin in Acts 5).
15. Shelya Abramovna, in an attempt to convert Natasha to atheism, gives two arguments for the wrongness of Christianity:
 - a. The Bible is "outdated and full of scientific mistakes. . . . Christianity is the fate of feeble and spineless individuals! Only those who lack a sense of personal value and are unable to confront the challenges of life turn to religion. They just want to dump their problems on God. For them God is like a crutch for a crippled invalid" (pp. 66–67).
 - b. "What kind of future awaits you if you don't turn away from religion? Will you be able to get higher education? I doubt it. . . . Do you realize that you are denying yourself the possibility of an interesting, creative profession? Why should you ruin your life?" (pp. 66–67).

How would *you* respond to Shelya's statements? Her arguments—that only those who can't face life's problems themselves use God as a "crutch" and that Natasha's future will be ruined if she doesn't reject God—are similar to Satan's temptations of Christ (Matt. 4:1–4, 8–10). How did Christ respond to Satan's attacks?

16. Natasha's university refuses to let her visit Babushka in prison, but Natasha feels that she *must* go—her grandmother has heart trouble and must have medicine, food, and warm clothing. To sidestep the problem Natasha finds a nurse who will give her an excuse from classes because of health reasons. As a result, Natasha is expelled (pp. 92–93). Did Natasha do the right thing, lying about being sick, even though her grandmother was sick and could die? Did Natasha get what she deserved?
17. After her expulsion from the university, Natasha confesses everything to her papa and concludes that "even Christians are doing such things" (p. 94). Georgi points out her erroneous thinking: "You are responsible for your own actions and can't excuse yourself because others consider certain things acceptable" (p. 94). Who is right, Georgi or Natasha? Just because other people are doing something wrong, does that make it right?
18. A theme is an idea, concept, or message that is reinforced through the overall work. After studying pages 56, 72–73, and 129, what do you think is the main theme of the book?