

A Sunday School Answer

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JUST ANOTHER DAY IN PARADISE in the Garden Park Ward. It was a spring morning that felt more like summer, and Sister Conway, our Sunday school instructor, was gracious enough to leave the door open, allowing daydreams to drift into my mind with each waft of the breeze. The lesson must have been from 1 Nephi because I heard Lehi, Laman, and Lemuel mentioned more than a few times, although in what context I really couldn't say, because, to be honest, I was ready for a nap. As fortune would have it, I *was* the only one in the last row, and after a quick side-to-side glance to assure no one was watching me, I leaned back my folding chair onto two legs and rested my head against the chalkboard in preparation for a few visions of my own when I heard a loud voice from the other side of the room shout, "That's a lie!"

Unable to catch myself, my chair slammed onto all fours like a rearing horse returning to earth, my triple combination toppling from my lap in the process. I bent down sheepishly to pick up my scriptures, sure that I had drawn everyone's attention in the room. It wasn't until I raised my head that I realized no one had noticed me. All eyes were on the opposite end of the room and no one was saying a word. Even Sister Conway was speechless, an occurrence I was sure had not been repeated during her waking hours since birth. Sister Conway could lecture on the scriptures from daylight till dark. She was always the picture of poise, a rigid woman in high collars with white hair and pearls to match who went about her duties with the constancy of the sunrise; she had been our teacher for as long as I could remember. There was a sternness about her that most attributed to years of singlehood and a life devoted to scripture (it was rumored that she spent Friday and Saturday nights reading the Old Testament for *pleasure*). She was questioned about as often as a drill sergeant—no, less—and anyone looking for query, debate, or discussion soon unknowingly found themselves walking a lonely plank in the class. Challenges to doctrine were snuffed out like matches in a hurricane. Therefore, it was with more than a little interest that I awoke to the first note of discord in Garden Park for years.

I was not the only one with raised eyebrows. Every eye had turned to Sister Conway, waiting for the fire to be extinguished. After carefully straightening the pearls around the collar of her navy blue dress, Sister Conway, minus only a fraction of her former composure, readied herself to challenge the misguided ward member.

"I have not lied, as you so bluntly put it. I have merely stated the well-known fact that the Lord sometimes justifies the taking of life in the name of a higher cause. It's hardly an isolated case. And what might your name be? I don't believe I have seen you around here before," she queried the perpetrator. She was looking to the opposite side of the room, in the back, a view from which I was unfortunately blocked by the accordion-like curtain. I wanted to move to the front but didn't want to interfere with this startling turn of events.

"Private Williams, ma'am and you haven't seen me because I've been to war. I believe you know my parents, Ed and Jeanie Williams." Now it was coming together in my head. The Williamses, longtime members of the ward, had recently moved to the other end of town. Their son was drafted almost two years ago. It seemed he was just a boy when he left.

"Arthur Williams?" she asked disbelievingly, "You look so ... so *changed*. I just spoke with your mother last week. She didn't say a word about you coming home. The last I heard, you were still in the trenches."

No response. Recognizing she may have jumped a little too quickly into private matters, Sister Conway's face flushed pink. I'd never seen her embarrassed before. Finally, Arthur ended the uncomfortable silence, "I don't suppose they want people knowing I'm home—at least for a while. I'm home ... you might as well know, ... earlier than anyone expected, earlier than I expected. The important thing is I am here. I'm just glad to be home."

For a second time Sister Conway became mute, at least momentarily. However, duty soon surfaced in her mind. "Well, *Brother Williams*, welcome back, I suppose is the thing to say. However, we need to move on with the lesson now. Let's get something straight, though, before we continue. First of all, you don't need to shout to be heard in this class and, second, surely there must be some kind of misunderstanding. Certainly you know Nephi was a very good man, a *God-fearing* man."

After this exchange and a look at the chalkboard, I had figured out that Arthur must be making reference to Nephi killing Laban, a section of 1 Nephi normally breezed through quicker than a two-minute talk. Personally, I'd never thought much about it. It was really elementary in my mind. In fact, we used to act out the incident in the halls of the church after Primary. We usually bullied one of the smaller kids into playing the part of Laban. He would stumble around drunk for a while using somebody's scriptures as temporary brass plates. Eventually he would tire

from lugging those heavy plates around and fall to the floor in a deep sleep. Once on the floor, one of us would tiptoe around the body, nudge him to see if he was really asleep, draw an imaginary sword (in form of a pencil) lift it high into the air, and finally, with the drop of our guillotine, come down Laban's neck. We certainly had no problems with Laban's death. To the contrary, *we gloried in it*. People died all the time in the Old Testament, and this particular slaying was always explained in class by the scripture, "better that one man perish than that a whole nation dwindle in unbelief," a textbook response never challenged until now. That's what made this disturbance so puzzling.

"I'm sorry if I shouted, I didn't mean to. But, you know, I've learned about Nephi all my life and suppose I always felt like the rest of you. I'm not holding anything against him personally. He did what he had to do and I did what I had to do. Before the war, I thought I could kill in the name of God and country and justify it. But I didn't know how ugly, how *final* death could be at the time. I see things differently now. Killing is killing, and I will tell you right here and now that it is a sin to take a man's life—it's something that will never go away for as long as you live. It doesn't make a bit of difference whether who said it was okay or not. Watching someone die in front of you is worse than dying yourself."

Apparently unnerved by the current controversy, a delicate sister excused herself from the row right in front of me and darted for the exit. Gratefully, I slipped into the vacant seat and finally got a look at the man in question. I wasn't about to leave now. This was the kind of thing I'd been waiting for all year. There hadn't been this much excitement in church since little Jimmy Allen had jumped out of his mother's arms in the middle of her testimony and done a somersault over the podium into the front row *without sustaining injuries*. This had been a miraculous occurrence in many ward members' eyes, one that perhaps even signified a special mission in life for little Jimmy—although most of us considered the child the devil incarnate after enduring his screaming in sacrament meeting.

I could now see into the back of the room and was amazed at what I saw. No wonder Sister Conway was caught off guard. I barely recognized Arthur. The last time I saw him, he was six inches shorter and wore a mop of hair over his eyes. I'd seen him a couple times in sacrament meeting in the last month, but had no idea he was one of the Williamses. He always sat in the back, same as me, usually by himself—I attributed his shyness to being a new member, but that was just a guess. However, I had never seen him in Sunday school at all.

"I don't care whose son he is. Who does he think he is, acting like this?" someone in front of me whispered indignantly.

"Apparently he hasn't studied the scriptures much. Sister Conway

shouldn't have to be dealing with this kind of nonsense," another responded.

"I'm going to get the bishop," Brother Gardner squeaked, ready to make his own escape. "The bishop should be hearing this; he'd know what to say."

"We don't need the bishop," Brother Malcolm grunted loud enough for everyone in the room to hear. "We're all adults here. Somebody just needs to tell this man the way things are. He's turned against all the teachings of the prophets. I don't know if he's just looking for attention or what."

"Brother Malcolm is right," Sister Conway answered, reassured by the sudden support. "This is something for us to resolve as a class. Listen to those of us with more experience with the scriptures. The scriptures are clear on this issue. There's really no room for dissent."

Arthur looked out the window without responding to the last comments. I was sure their rebuttal had silenced him. I was sure he was down for the count when, to my astonishment, he steadied himself once again, speaking as clearly as before: "With all due respect, you don't understand—none of you understands." He paused for a moment, then, choosing his words carefully, continued, "I'm not against the scriptures. I believe in the word of God. It's just that I've seen a lot of bad things the last couple of years—wicked things in more shapes than I will ever be able to forget, but I'm not God, I can't just wipe the wickedness from the earth by pulling a trigger or taking a knife to someone's throat. I just can't help thinking of Pilate trying to wash his hands of Christ's death. Do you think he ever really got that off his conscience or did it go with him to the grave? Do you think we are any different? I saw people try and I saw them become their own worst enemy. I couldn't let that happen to me. We're human beings—not animals. I forgot that for a while and thank God I remembered that, even if it got me to where I am now. And I'll tell you, if God himself asked me to kill another man, I'd reply, 'I love you Lord, but find another man.'"

"That's blasphemy," Brother Malcolm shouted. "You don't belong in church."

"Maybe you're right. Maybe you're right," Arthur answered solemnly. "At least, not in this one. At least, not here." With the look of a lawyer who just lost his case, Arthur quietly gathered his things, zipped his scriptures shut, and turned to go.

"Arthur, why don't we just see what the scriptures say on the matter," interjected Sister Conway, mechanically, in a last ditch attempt to restore order to the classroom. "That is where the answers lie." Deaf to her suggestion, Arthur didn't turn back. I watched him slip quietly away and pull the door inaudibly shut behind him. And he was gone.

"The answer's not in the scriptures Sister Conway."

"What," Sister Conway replied, uncertain of the source of the comment. It came from Sister Jamison. She was on her feet now. Even standing up, she could barely be seen above the rest of us sitting. She was just over five feet tall, in her mid-eighties, and this was the first time I'd ever heard her speak. No one called on her to read scriptures anymore—her eyes were too bad. Instead of her scriptures, she brought a basket of yarn to church with her. I often wondered as she crocheted her way through the lesson if she ever heard anything.

"I said, the answer's not in the scriptures." She spoke in a quiet, steady voice. "Don't you see what you've done? I've sat through Sunday school for nearly sixty years now and I've never been ashamed until now." Everyone stared at her like they were looking at a body raised from the dead. "As most of you know, my husband died in the great World War. I raised my children without him, went to church without him. I never remarried. I just never could replace my memories of him. I still love my husband more and more each day, but he's not here. He died in Europe somewhere. Do you know how he died? A member of his regiment was kind enough to write me a letter. He told me that John was gunned down while trying to lift another soldier back to the trench. He foolishly dropped his gun and went after his friend. A war was on and I am sure that man who killed him believed in his heart that he was fulfilling his duty or, at least, following orders. I forgave that man long ago, but after listening to Arthur here talk, maybe no cause is noble enough to take someone's life. You can look in the scriptures all you want, but the answer is only found in you. Could I have killed Laban? No. Never. Never in a thousand years. Should Nephi have killed Laban? Well, let Nephi answer that one. Brother Williams has left our company. I can't save those other lives, but I most certainly won't lose this one. With a little luck and God's speed, I still may catch him before he drives off." Leaving a bag full of yarn behind, Sister Jamison, too, departed. The door closed behind her with a hollow thud.

The class stared at the door for what seemed like a long while, perhaps expecting them to come back, but they didn't. The clack of the chalk on the board awoke the class from their trance. Sister Conway was attacking the board furiously, listing scripture after scripture. "Now, let's all get back to 1 Nephi. We only have ten more minutes and we've barely touched the surface." The victor's smile returned to Brother Malcolm's face and he mumbled his approval. The rest of the class followed suit, obediently opening their scriptures. The incident was over before it started.

In a way I was relieved. I was beginning to feel uncomfortable, about what exactly, I can't quite say. What do you say to someone like Arthur

anyway? Doing my best to remain unnoticed, I slid back to my original seat and, tilting my chair once again, envisioned swords and battle-grounds until the murmur of the class entirely faded from my mind.