

Jedediah Webb: Circuit Rider

Chpt. 10

Fall 1879

Once back in Coleman, the pain in my left arm from the “scratch” of the bullet was not nearly as bad as the pain I received from Angela. I could tell that she was relieved, grateful, sad, angry, resentful, and worried all at once. After she treated my wound, she gave me the “cold treatment.” She spoke little to me while I healed up. It took several days before she could sit with me and share her feelings. “I am worried all of the time about your adventurous soul. It seems that you take unnecessary chances without thinking of the consequences of how your actions will affect others. Sometimes I wonder if you will live long enough to be a father!” These words stabbed me clear to my soul. Angela is right. I take too many chances in my quests to deliver justice in this world, and I am determined to slow down and think before I act. I told Angela of my new outlook on life, and she seemed pleased...yet cautious to believe me right away. I guess I will have to prove to her through my actions that I have changed.

I realize now that the thrill of adventure for my own gratification is not how God wants me to live. My thrill seeking through dangerous activities is affecting the lives of those who love me. In other words, I am keeping my mind on the flesh rather than on the spirit. As Paul told us, *“For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God” (Romans 8:5-8)*. On the spot, I rededicated my life to God and to increasing my efforts to keep my mind more on the spirit and the laws of God rather than on my own selfish desires. I will continue to fight for justice, but I will do it according to God’s wishes rather than for my own adventurous nature.

In late September, I was informed that Willie was in jail in Buffalo Gap awaiting trial for the murder the of the three men who accosted Angela. I immediately rode to Buffalo Gap to visit him. I was fairly confident that with Angela's testimony, Willie would be cleared of the charges of murder. When I got to the Taylor County Jail, Sheriff Crawford informed me that Willie was acting quite distraught and was on suicide watch with his deputies. He also told me that a trial was to be held soon, and that Angela and I would be subpoenaed to testify.

I spoke with Willie in his cell. Willie said to me, "Considering all of the bad things I've done in my life that I deserve to die for, I can't believe that I am going to be hanged for saving someone's life." I reassured Willie that Angela and I would testify on his behalf that it was self-defense. "Thanks for trying, but since those boys never fired a shot, I am sure they will hang me. Anyway, I don't see how God can forgive me for all that I've done, so I know I am going to Hell after I am hanged."

I urged Willie to ask God for forgiveness. "It is never too late to ask God to forgive you and for you to give your life to him. God rejoices each time one of his children who was lost finds Him." I told him about the Parable of the Lost Coin. Jesus tells us that God is like the woman who lost a coin. She searched and finally found it. Then she celebrated the finding of that lost coin, *"Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Doesn't she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin'" (Luke 15:8-9).* God celebrates each time anyone who was lost to Him decides to ask forgiveness and turn their lives over to Him. I said to Willie, "God is waiting for you to have a change of heart and join with Him. He wants to celebrate a new eternal life with you, Willie."

Willie then told me, "It is too late for me to be saved. I have done evil things most of my life, and I have waited too long. I am about to die for my sins." I told him about the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard found in chapter 20 of the Book of Matthew. Workers were hired all day long to work in the vineyard, but at the end of the day they were all paid the same wage regardless of when they started working that day. When some of the workers complained that the master was unfair, he responded, *"But he*

answered one of them, 'I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?' So the last will be first, and the first will be last"

(Matthew 20:13-16). Jesus tells us that no matter how late in life people sincerely turn their lives over to Christ, the reward is still the same – eternal life with Him in Heaven. God does not play favorites, and He gives eternal life to all who ask for it.

Willie said, "So you're saying that it's never too late to accept the love of God. It's never too late to be forgiven. Even someone as bad as me?" I answered him, "No, it's not me saying that - God Himself tells us that." **Romans 10:13** says, "*For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.*" Willie went silent. For several minutes I joined him in his silence. I told him that I was going to leave, and while I was gone, it would be a good idea for him just to talk to God for a while. I gave him a copy of the Bible to read in my absence. I marked **Romans 10:9-10**, "*Because if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart, leading to righteousness, and one confesses with the mouth, leading to salvation.*" For the first time ever, Willie reached out to me and grasped me. It was a rather awkward hug – but a hug all the same.

In early October, Angela and I journeyed up to Buffalo Gap to be witnesses in Willie's trial. Angela related the story exactly as it happened. I gave an account of arriving on the scene after the fact. I was a little nervous about Willie's chances of an acquittal until several men from the Buffalo Gap area took the stand and related conversations they had with the three men who accosted Willie and Angela. The night before, the three men had shared with their friends in the local saloon what they were going to do the next day. They made lewd comments about Angela's body and talked about what they were going to do with her before they shut her up forever. The men were also debating what to do with Willie – whether to kill him or let him live. Angela's face turned red. I was not sure if she was blushing or angry...or both.

As it turns out, Willie was right on the money with his decision to shoot those men down as fast as he did. There literally would have been no time for talking. Those men's minds were made up. The jury agreed, and the judge hammered the gavel in favor of exonerating Willie. Everyone congratulated Willie on his acquittal. The families of the three men were not so happy. They uttered a few threats that only Willie and I could hear, and they left the courthouse. I figure we might have to deal with some of them in the future. Through all of this, Willie is now a changed man. He told me, "I realize now how far away I walked from God in my life. I had a passing relationship with God when I was young, but I left him for the evil pleasures of the world. I am so grateful that God has guided me back to Him. I am also grateful to you, Jed. You have stuck with me and guided me toward God ever since I met you. Thank you, I owe you my life." I embraced him and whispered in his ear, "You don't owe me a thing. You owe your thanks and praise to our Triune God: God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit."

We returned to Coleman together, and Willie was making plans to move to Coleman and set his life up to help those in need. I directed him to Angel and Rachel to help with setting up and running the orphanage. I have never seen Willie so happy. He later described to me that he felt a "warming of the heart" once he realized he was truly forgiven for his past and was reconciled with God forever. I couldn't help but recall that is exactly what John Wesley, founder of Methodism, said about his own true conversion.

Christmas 1879

This year it had been decided that I would spend the days before Christmas on the circuit in Brownwood, Copperas Creek, Turkey Creek, and spend Christmas Eve in Abilene. I would then travel to Buffalo Gap on Christmas Day and spend the next few days there. I would be back in Coleman in time for New Year's Day. I fully expected to make the trip alone; but to my surprise, Angela and Willie both insisted on going along. It truly was a blessed trip that Christmas. I believe that God made the trip extra joyful and peaceful for us as we celebrated the birth of His son with all of the people on the

circuit. It surely was a time of "Peace on Earth, Goodwill toward Men"...at least in our little corner of the Earth.

Spring 1880

It is March, and it is time for the Easter run on the circuit. For each community, the sermon will be titled, "Going after Jesus." When Jesus entered Jerusalem just before he was crucified, the corrupt religious leaders observed how popular Jesus was to the masses of people. The people were shouting, *"Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord – the King of Israel!"* (John 12:13). The religious leaders looked upon this and realized how much Jesus was loved by the people and how they were losing their power. They remarked, *"Look, the world has gone after Him"* (John 12:19). Everyone was going after Jesus: the crowd of people, the Pharisee Leaders, the Disciples, the soldiers, and Mary and the other women who were at the tomb after Jesus was crucified and buried. They all wanted Jesus for varied reasons. We should still be going after Jesus every day with a passion.

I want people to understand why it is important to chase after Jesus on a daily basis. Lukewarm Christians sometimes only think of Jesus on Sundays and focus entirely on the world during the week. But the Holy Spirit who resides in us when we give ourselves to Jesus Christ, reminds us that Jesus is our Lord. By going to His death on the cross, Jesus died in our place. Humankind deserved to die because of their sins, but Jesus took all of our sins on His shoulders and died in our place. We can now be forgiven of our sins and be reunited with our Lord God in heaven - forever and ever. We should be seeking Jesus' company every day of our lives. We should be talking with Him constantly. Every day we should be following Jesus' commands, *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments"* (Matthew 22:36-40).

In every community at Easter, we celebrated the risen Christ. We held communion, baptized children and adults, sang hymns, and shared personal stories of salvation. We performed funerals, and we even held a couple of weddings for those who could not wait until the next circuit visit. It truly was a glorious time. We even had

some fun with the Easter Rabbit and Easter eggs. I explained to the children that it is okay to have fun with the Easter Rabbit and Easter egg hunts, but we must never overlook the importance of the real reason we celebrate Easter – the resurrection of the Living Christ.

Summer 1880

Again, summer is good for taking time off due to the summer heat. I worked on several construction projects in town including the Methodist Church and the parsonage. I bought a few acres outside of town and began working on a barn, stable, and corral to provide protection for my livestock. Angela was talking to me regularly now. She seemed to have gotten over her anger and worry about my dangerous and adventurous spirit. All was calm until Henry showed up at my door one morning. He had a proposal for me.

Henry told me that he was going to lead a troop of Texas Rangers on a scout to look for Armando Kelly who went by the name “Red Lobo.” He was given orders to find Armando Kelly and his gang and put an end to their thieving and terrorizing settlers just west of Coleman County. This bandit is of Irish/Mexican heritage, thus his red hair and his reputation for being a predator earned him the name of “Red Lobo.” He was looking for someone to serve as Chaplain for the men on this excursion, and he wanted to know if I was interested. He said it was a paid position and would be temporary for this excursion only.

I was thrilled at the prospect of a new adventure, but I was smart enough to say, “I will pray on this and talk to Angela, and I will get back to you with an answer.” Yes, it was going to take a lot of prayer and convincing to get Angela’s approval. When I first told her of the expedition, she began to cry. I quickly told her it was only temporary. Also, I would not be required to fight in the battles (if there were some), and the extra money I would receive would certainly benefit us in saving up to begin our family. My purpose would only be to inspire the men and provide spiritual guidance. Yes, I pulled out every possible argument to get her to say, “Yes.” She did give her consent eventually, but she made me promise to stay calm and behind the line of fire. Of course I agreed to these conditions...and wondered if I could keep these promises.

Henry led a troop of 10 men plus 25 horses who doubled as pack horses and second mounts. We did not have a wagon, as that would slow us down. On our horses, we packed water, guns, ammunition, and hardtack. We had to leave a lot of luxuries behind such as extra food supplies, kitchen and camping utensils, tents, extra blankets, tarps, and other comforts of home. We had an excellent tracker leading us. He was almost as good as Paul. We tracked the gang west of Coleman along Hord's Creek and then cut south to the Colorado River and then further south to the Concho River near the community of Paint Rock in Concho County. By reading the tracks, the gang seemed to number at least a dozen men and extra horses. The number did not intimidate the Rangers. They knew that each Texas Ranger was equal to 5 bandits as far as fighting prowess goes. So theoretically, we had them outnumbered at least 5:1.

Living with the Texas Rangers on the trail was a new experience for me. When not on the trail we were either sleeping, eating, hunting meat, entertaining one another with stories, practicing marksmanship, or drilling on fighting from horseback and under cover. Henry banned games of gambling as they often led to fights among the men; however, competitions of skill (without wagering) were popular. We quickly figured out who was best at marksmanship, riding, tracking, roping, and anything else we could think of. Needless to say, I was not a winner of any of the contests. Too bad we didn't have a contest for best evangelist. The talents among these men are extraordinary, and I felt confident and safe.

As to the drills, Henry reminded everyone that warfare against bandits is much different than with the Apache and Comanche. Indian warfare involved fighting on horseback at a full gallop as the opponents rarely dismounted to fight. Warfare with bandits is guerilla-type fighting which involves dismounting, seeking cover, and firing at the enemy who is also undercover. If the bandits choose to remain on horseback, they are "easy pickings" as they are not accustomed to fighting on the run. We drilled constantly on seeking cover at a moment's notice.

I do my best to meet the spiritual needs of the men who find themselves in battling for their lives. A favorite scripture for encouraging soldiers comes from 2 Samuel. David sang this song to God in praise for God's protecting him from his

enemies, *"You, Lord, are my light; you dispel my darkness. You give me strength to attack my enemies and power to overcome their defenses. This God—how perfect are his deeds, how dependable his words! He is like a shield for all who seek his protection. The Lord alone is God; God alone is our defense. This God is my strong refuge; he makes my pathway safe. He makes me sure-footed as a deer; he keeps me safe on the mountains. He trains me for battle, so that I can use the strongest bow. O Lord, you protect me and save me; your help has made me great. You have kept me from being captured, and I have never fallen. I pursue my enemies and defeat them; I do not stop until I destroy them. I strike them down, and they cannot rise; they lie defeated before me. You give me strength for the battle and victory over my enemies. You make my enemies run from me. I destroy those who hate me. They look for help, but no one saves them; they call to the Lord, but he does not answer. I crush them, and they become like dust; I trample on them like mud in the streets. You saved me from my rebellious people and maintained my rule over the nations; people I did not know have now become my subjects. Foreigners bow before me; when they hear me, they obey. They lose their courage and come trembling from their fortresses. The Lord lives! Praise my defender! Proclaim the greatness of the strong God who saves me! He gives me victory over my enemies; he subdues the nations under me and saves me from my foes"* (2 Samuel 22:29-49). The men asked me to read this scripture to them over and over. It seemed to fortify them and encourage them knowing that our Great Protector God is watching over us as we fight to protect others from evil.

Red Lobo and his gang were holed up by the Concho River just west of the community of Paint Rock. As we neared them, we saw why this area was named "Paint Rock." We came across numerous drawings of human and animal figures etched into limestone cliffs. These artifacts are estimated to be at least 700-800 years old. Some are much more recent as they portray the scalping and abducting of what appears to be Anglo settlers. It is believed they were created by the Comanche and/or Apache Tribes in the area.

Henry sent a scout ahead to reconnoiter the situation. The scout returned and informed us that there were at least 20 men in camp along with Red Lobo himself. They

were settling in for the night and were roasting a steer that they had butchered. It also seemed that they had a good supply of liquor on hand and were doing their best to empty those bottles. It strikes me as sad when enemies are drunk when they are confronted because they are not in their right minds to surrender like they might do if sober. The troops mounted and charged the camp. I was ordered to stay back and mind the extra horses. I could hear the shouts and firing of guns. The bandits were completely taken by surprise. As I stood and listened to the melee, I was suddenly approached by two men who apparently were lookouts on the perimeter of their camp and had slipped away from the battle. They were on the run, and they were shocked to run into me. They lifted their pistols and aimed at me, and there I was standing unarmed. I was mortified that I did not have the presence of mind to get my guns from Rahab's saddle when the fighting began just in case I needed to protect myself. I guess I still have a lot to learn.

The men took several shots at me but missed because I dove to the ground and to the right. I continued to roll as they took a couple more shots at me. They were more concerned about getting away than killing me. They turned their attention to the horses, and they were untying two of them when Henry appeared from the brush. Henry killed them with two bullets. I was relieved yet embarrassed that Henry saved my life. I must have appeared like a helpless child in that situation. Henry never talked about it afterwards or mentioned to the others that I was unarmed, helpless, and nearly killed.

No prisoners were taken as the bandits were all killed in the skirmish. One Ranger was slightly wounded, and the horses were all unscathed. The lesser bandits were buried, but Red Lobo and several others had bounties on their heads. Their bodies were wrapped and loaded on horses for the return trip. Several of the Rangers voiced that we should just remove their heads and bring them in instead of the entire bodies. Henry was repulsed by that idea and told them to leave their heads intact. In Paint Rock we left the bodies and recorded the bounties with the Sheriff. He really didn't want them, but Henry was not about to drag decaying bodies all the way back to Coleman.

We hurried back home. The men regaled the details of the battle over and over until we all had memorized every moment. I am sure this story will be told repeatedly, and the story will probably get more heroic and intense each time it is told. I thanked Henry for not telling the others about my part in the attack and asked him not to mention anything to Angela. He completely understood. "I won't tell Angela what happened because I want you to be able to serve as Chaplain again. I am sure you have learned a lot and might be willing to help me in the future. Perhaps it is best Angela doesn't hear the dangerous parts of these scouting trips." I agreed with Henry. It is not that I want to keep secrets from Angela, but I don't want her to worry about me. At home, Angela was glad to see me, and she asked how the scouting trip was. I told her it was quite boring and that I did not participate in the battle. Maybe one day I will give her more details.

Fall 1880

A few weeks later, Henry asked me to serve as Chaplain again. He was called to pull together some Rangers and help Texas Rangers Lt. Baylor and Sgt. Gillette and their men to subdue Victorio, Mescalero Apache Chief. Victorio and 125 warriors left the reservation in New Mexico and moved to the Texas-Mexico border. There they were stealing livestock on both sides of the Rio Grande and hiding from Texas and Mexico lawmen. The scout group I was part of never did catch up to Victorio, but while on the trail, we got word that Chief Victorio and his warriors were killed by the U.S. and Mexican Armies on October 15 in the Tres Castillos Mountains south of El Paso. With that news, we headed back to Coleman. I again reported to Angela that the trip was boring.

Time seemed to fly by in Coleman, Texas. The orphanage was growing in numbers, and Willie was instrumental in the upkeep and the organizing of volunteers. Willie is currently overseeing the building project to add more rooms, a bigger kitchen, and some playground equipment for the facility. He certainly has a heart for the children in the orphanage as well as all children. He is no longer the gruff, angry, desperate man he once was. The Holy Spirit has changed him completely.

The Christmas Trail went well this year. Angela accompanied me on the circuit for the month of December, and we had a glorious time with the different churches on the

circuit. The towns are growing in population, and this “wilderness area” of Texas is becoming safer. Most of the churches are wanting a full-time pastor and are asking me to move to their town and be their spiritual leader. I think that they want Angela more than me, and I cannot blame them for feeling that way. At each stop, we had a glorious time celebrating the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

We returned to Coleman in time to celebrate Christmas with family. It doesn't happen often that I get to be with my family at Christmas. We made it a celebration to remember for the ages! My parents came from Dublin, and we put together a huge meal for the entire community at the Methodist Church. The parsonage still has some final changes to be made, but there was room enough for the family to stay over. More good news - between Christmas and New Year's Day, Angela's mother and Clarence Goodman got married. Angela's sisters got to move into Clarence's big, beautiful house and have their own rooms as they are growing into young womanhood. Jeremiah's family and Paul's family are fully engulfed in the culture of Coleman. Henry is not around very much as he is constantly being called for Texas Ranger duties, but we have a grand time when he is in town.

Spring 1881

The Coleman Methodist Church continues to flourish, and again the members are pressuring me to quit riding the circuit and be a full-time pastor in Coleman. They have petitioned the Methodist Conference to consider this proposal. The best news for me arrived in March. Angela is pregnant and the baby is due in October. It seems that God might be urging me to settle down, raise a family, and devote my preaching energy to Coleman. I have some real soul-searching to do.

The only way to do that is through lots of talking with God.

Matt Stephen

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