

Jedediah Webb: Circuit Rider

Chpt. 11

Spring 1881

Life is good. Angela is pregnant. Most everyone in Coleman is healthy and happy. My family and friends are doing well and moving forward with the goals they have set for their lives. It is easy to glorify God when things are going well. Sometimes when life is exceptionally smooth, one can bring on a foreboding that things are going so well that something bad is sure to happen soon. I believe it is only human to think these thoughts, but Jesus warns us against that kind of thinking, and He tells us not to worry, *"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is life not more than food, and the body more than clothes?"* (Matthew 6:25). When it comes to worry, I think of the scripture that assures us of God's providence over our lives. As Paul tells us, *"And we know that in all things God works for the good for those who love him, who have been called according to His purpose"* (Romans 8:28). So as Paul asks, *"What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?"* (Romans 8:31). I want people to genuinely believe that if the greatest force in the universe is behind us, no matter what trials the world deals to us, we will always have the ultimate gift of everlasting life with God in paradise.

This spring the Texas and Pacific Railroad tracks reached Abilene. An auction was held this Spring in Abilene, and many families purchased lots on which to build. Abilene has been considerably tamed, and it is turning into the notable city many people anticipated it would be. The U.S. Postal Service has opened up local offices in all of the towns on the Brownwood/Abilene Episcopal Methodist circuit. Short stagecoach lines have been established in the area to provide fast transportation from town to town. Efficiency in communications and travel have made great strides over the past few years. It is looking as though the concept of the traveling preacher will end soon – even in these far reaches of the wilderness of Texas.

I have begun to construct a house next to the barn and corral on my property outside of town. I am thinking ahead to prepare for growing my family and in anticipation of staying in Coleman. I am already asking Angela for possible names for our first child. She is probably not ready to hear my suggestions. If he were a boy, I would like to name him after one of my Texas Ranger heroes (John, Sam, Ben, William). If a girl, any name will do as long as the middle name is "Sue" (a good Texas name). Angel has agreed to help Angela with her own delivery, and about that delivery - I am as nervous as a long-tailed cat in a room of rocking chairs.

In March and April on the circuit, I planned the title of the main sermon to be "*End Times: Like a Thief in the Night, Jesus Will Come. Now Is the Time to be Ready.*" It is important for the people to know that at any moment, Jesus may appear in the clouds and take the faithful up into heaven with Him. Jesus tells us that He will appear to us suddenly in the clouds, "*Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other*" (Matthew 24:29-31).

Jesus tells us that only God knows the day and time Jesus will appear to us in the clouds, "*But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only*" (Matthew 24:36); and Jesus tells us that only the faithful will be taken up to heaven, "*I tell you, in that night there will be two in one bed. One will be taken and the other left. There will be two women grinding meal together. One will be taken and the other left*" (Luke 17:34-35); So Jesus tells us to always be on guard and to be ready, "*Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come*" (Mark 13:33).

To be on guard and to stay awake means we are to always be prepared to face God. John tells us in his God-given vision of the judgment in heaven, *"And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done...And if anyone's name was not found written in the Book of Life, he was thrown into the lake of fire"* (**Revelation 20:12,15**). We do not want to miss our opportunity to be taken to heaven.

At the Episcopal Methodist Northwest Texas Conference meeting in early May, it was declared that my charge would remain the same for the 1881-82 year with the addition of the communities of Clyde and Vickory to the Brownwood/Abilene circuit. The Texas Pacific Railway is now serving these two communities just East of Abilene, and these areas will need a presence of the Methodist Church as they are growing fast. I had already begun working with people in both communities, so this was a welcomed charge. The church in Coleman was not happy that I had not been granted to be the preacher full-time at Coleman beginning this June. I soothed their anger by assuring them I would continue to talk with the conference elders about the future of this circuit.

May/June 1881

In June, preachers usually take a few weeks off to rest, but I was called to Brownwood in late May to preside over several funerals. There had been an outbreak of Yellow Fever, and 12 people had perished. Angela was upset that this happened so suddenly, and she accompanied me to Brownwood to tend to those still sick. We arrived in Brownwood and tended to the needs of the community. I marvel at how much Angela is loved by the people all along the circuit. She heals them of their physical ailments through her doctor skills, she soothes their emotions with messages of hope and instructions on how to improve their health, and she attends to their spiritual needs by evangelizing to them about God's love and protection. It is obvious to me that Angela will be missed far more than I by the different communities once we are able to settle exclusively in Coleman.

As we returned to Coleman, we were met by Texas Ranger Henry Armstrong. He was moving at a full gallop headed south. Henry told us that four young girls from the

orphanage as well as Angela's sister, Judith, had been kidnapped just this morning. They were on a picnic at one of the local creeks near Coleman when they were accosted by a gang of outlaws from the Lampasas area. Willie, Angel, Rachel, and Rustler were with the children when they were attacked. Angel and Rachel were wounded, and Willie was killed – but not before he killed two of the villains. Rustler accounted for killing one kidnapper before they shot him full of holes.

Rachel reported that the gang consisted of 12 men who rushed them so quickly that they had no time to react other than to stand in front of the children. The cutthroats shot Willie, struck the two women to the ground, and rounded up the kids to put them in their wagon along with other children who already were tied up. After he was down on the ground with bullet wounds, Willie shot two of the men before they could get the children loaded onto the wagon. After that, the attackers laughed as they shot Willie 20 times or more. The attack only lasted a few minutes, and the gang was on the trail heading south.

Henry said, "I can only figure this is the gang from Lampasas that has been kidnapping girls and selling them south of the border to sex traders. I need your help, Jed. I am by myself as Jeremiah and Paul are tending to the women and children who were hurt. You and I will have to move fast to catch up with them vipers before they further harm the girls." I looked at Angela. She had a look on her face that I had never seen before. She simply said, "Jed, do whatever you have to do to save those children. I don't care what it takes. Bring them home safely to us." I never thought Angela would order me to kill someone, but that is what her tear-filled eyes told me in that quick moment. Without another word she spurred her horse, Sophia, to a full gallop and headed to Coleman to doctor those who were hurt.

It has been several years since something like this has happened in the Coleman area, and I was mad at myself and the community for becoming so complacent. However, there was no need to stew over this at the moment. We would all be more on our guard after this is over. Henry and I raced at full gallop along the trail that the kidnappers had taken. It was easy to follow the tracks of the wagon. Just as what happened four years ago out of Brownwood, these kidnappers must have thought they

would not be chased by locals. As tired as she was after our long trip from Brownwood, Rahab was up to the challenge of racing to catch the murdering kidnappers.

I didn't have time to mourn yet for Willie and Rustler, but I did wonder what I would do when we caught the kidnappers. Would I be seeking justice or exacting revenge? I know that God tells us to leave vengeance to Him. As Paul tells us, *"Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay,' says the lord."* (Romans 12:9). I am angry at these men for killing Willie and my dog, Rustler. I am angry that they stole our girls to sell them as sex slaves to the South American slave traders. I am angry that these poor girls are scared out of their minds as they are being carried away from home by evil doers. I am angry with myself for not being there to protect my family. I am angry that I was called away from my loved ones to take care of others. With all of this anger, I am not sure whether I am acting out of a strong sense of justice...or just outright revenge.

On the run, I yelled at Henry, "What are we going to do when we catch them?" Henry replied, "There are only 9 of them thanks to Willie and Rustler. I believe that 2:9 odds are good for any Texas Ranger and an honorary Texas Ranger. The kidnappers are hopelessly outnumbered! We will simply charge them with everything we've got and with guns drawn. The children should be safe enough in the wagon. We cannot give these men the chance to use the children as human shields. These men have already shown how desperate they are by murdering Willie. They will give us no quarter and neither will we!"

Within the hour, we were close enough to them for Henry to use his spyglass to determine the best course of action. The kidnappers were moving at a slow pace. One man was driving the wagon. Four men rode next to the wagon while two men scouted ahead and two took the rear guard. Their big mistake was that the two rear men were not far enough back from the wagon to be able to give adequate warning to the rest of the gang that someone was approaching from the rear. The two men scouting ahead were not a big concern as we planned to dispatch the seven others before they could return. By that time, they most likely would decide to hightail it out of here. We would then have to run them down if they took off. No one was to get away. That left 7 men for

us to surprise and dispatch with haste. I was to take the 3 men to the left of the wagon and Henry would handle the right side. It is a good thing that I had been sufficiently drilled on the art of warfare from the back of a horse. Shooting and hitting a target at a full gallop is a skill that one hones over time. It is too bad Paul is not here to take my place. He has been performing this maneuver since he was a small child.

The brush was thick enough that we should be able to get within 100 feet of them before they heard us coming. Henry reminded me to use the scattergun first then move to the six guns. The rifles would come last if any of the remaining kidnappers were to run. Rahab seemed to know what was about to happen, and she was almost giddy with anticipation. It was hard to hold her back until we were ready to run. As we neared the wagon, we could see that some of the children were sitting up and some were lying down. All of them looked to be well tied up. It was our hope that when the shooting started, they would all hunker down as low as they could get in that wagon.

Approximately 50 feet away, Henry gave me the signal to ride and shoot. Rahab and I shot forward toward the rear man on the left. I knocked him off of his horse with one blast from the scattergun. I missed my second man with a blast from the other barrel. I drew my pistol and hit my second man, but he remained on his horse. I shot and missed my third man as he had time to maneuver his horse around to face me. He sighted his rifle on me, and I knew I was a dead man. Henry downed the villain from his horse with a shot from his pistol while he was holding the driver still with his other pistol. I looked around to see Henry's three men lying quite still on the ground. As we held guns on the survivors, we watched for the two lead scouts to return, but they did not. Henry took out after them and left me to guard the children and the wounded gang members.

The entire battle took less than a minute. As I surveyed the area, I observed that there was one wounded man still on his horse, five men on the ground of which three were dead and two were wounded, and the driver had his hands held high. I disarmed the men and tied them up. I untied the children and did my best to calm them down. They were terrified and elated at the same time. Angela's sister, Judith, grabbed me and would not let go. About an hour later, Henry returned with two dead men draped over

their saddles. I did not ask him how the fight with them went and whether or not he had to kill them. I saw that they were dead and just let it go at that.

Texas Ranger Whitely and two of his men from Brownwood rode up as we were loading the dead and wounded prisoners in the wagon. They helped us get the children mounted on the gang members' horses, and we set out for Coleman. One of Ranger Whitely's men galloped ahead to let the community know we were all fine and headed back home. We took our time and sang some hymns of joy and praise to our loving God. I don't think I have ever heard the children sing with such gusto!

Once we returned to Coleman, there was a joyous reunion among all of the community members. I believe everyone was in the square to celebrate the return of the girls. Angela and her mother, Saphronia, and sister, Ruth, hugged Judith until they nearly suffocated her. Rachel and Angel were still smarting from their being struck by the gang members, but they were there to hug all of the girls. Jeremiah and Paul, as well as the rest of the community, wanted to know all of the details of the rescue, so we had to relate the story over and over. We celebrated with the families of the 4 girls in Coleman, and we located the families of the 8 remaining girls, some of whom I recognized from communities to the east, to come celebrate as well.

Celebrations aside, we also had some serious work to do. We doctored the living kidnapers and quickly buried the dead ones. We escorted the survivors to the county jail to be held for trial. People from other counties would also press charges of kidnapping and assault or murder. These men's days were numbered. We also busied ourselves planning the burial of our friend, Willie. There is some good news. I was relieved to learn that Rustler was not killed by the murdering kidnapers, but he had three bullet holes in him and several scratches where bullets grazed him. Angela took good care of him throughout his recovery.

I found it difficult to officiate at Willie's funeral. This was the most personal funeral that I had conducted up to this time. A huge crowd was in attendance. They came to honor the man who saved many of the children from the kidnapers. If it weren't for Willie's efforts, this evil gang would have captured all 20 children who were at the picnic. As it was, Willie defended the children, Angel, and Rachel to his death. Years ago Willie

might have just left the scene and left the children and women to defend themselves. But Willie was a changed man since he began to walk the narrow road as a child of God.

I told the crowd at the gravesite, "Willie saved my life several times. He saved Angela's life as well. The two of us owe him everything. I know many of you feel the same way – that you are indebted to Willie for things he has done for you – especially since he began his close walk with Jesus Christ. Willie, himself, would tell you that he traveled the road of darkness for years. However, he discovered God's love and gave his life over to Jesus late in his life. He worked for God's kingdom by helping with the orphanage. He loved the children in the orphanage. He would have done anything for them. He proved it by giving up his life to try and save them from evil men determined to harm them. Willie lived a turbulent life, and he had many, many trials along the way. Jesus tells us that we will have trials, but they make our faith grow stronger, *"I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world"* (John 16:33).

"There is no doubt in my mind that Willie is face-to-face with Jesus and our Almighty Father right now in heaven. Jesus is pleased with the way that Willie followed Him – even for a short time. Jesus made it clear what the greatest show of love is. He told us, *'Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends'* (John 15:13). Willie did just that. Thank you, Willie for loving us and protecting us. We will see you again on the other side of our eternity." After the funeral, the community began planning a park and playground for the community children in Willie's honor. When it is finished it will be called, "Willie's Wonderful World." This playground is designed with playground equipment to honor Willie's search for adventure and fun.

Rustler's recovery was a long process. Angela, Angel, and Rachel were determined to help him survive in order to pay him back for his brave actions of defending them against those evil men. Although Rustler did not die, he did lose a leg. His circuit traveling days are over, and I will certainly miss having him on the trail. He gets to lie around the house and be loved by Angela's sisters and eat all of the sweet treats he wants. I selected one of Rustler's wolf-like sons to accompany me on the

circuit from now on. I named him Hustler because of his never-ending energy which allowed him to keep up with me and Rahab. I made a good choice as Hustler was a copy of his dad. He was loyal, hardworking, and he loves sweets!

July 1881

The sermon I prepared for the circuit in July was titled, "Three Wishes or One Prayer?" I want people to understand that God is not a genie who grants wishes like in the story of Aladdin and his magic lamp. I have spoken to people who say they asked God for something, and they didn't get it, so they are going to walk away from God. We should not put God to the test when we pray to him for things that we want. When we pray to God, we must be in a right relationship with Him. Jesus tells us that when we pray, we must ask in faith that it will be received, *"Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive"* (Matthew 21:22). The key word here is faith. We must pray in faith that He will grant requests that fall within His will.

So, what is a good thing to pray for? How about wisdom? God was pleased with King Solomon when he asked for wisdom rather than power or riches. When told by God that he could have anything he wanted, Solomon asked God, *"So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?"* (1 Kings 3:9). God was so pleased, He answered, *"Since you have asked for this and not for long life or wealth for yourself, nor have asked for the death of your enemies but for discernment in administering justice, I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be. Moreover, I will give you what you have not asked for—both wealth and honor—so that in your lifetime you will have no equal among kings. And if you walk in obedience to me and keep my decrees and commands as David your father did, I will give you a long life"* (1 Kings 3:11-14). Solomon asked for wisdom, and God ensured he had that as well as other blessings.

James tells us to pray for wisdom with the faith that we will be granted wisdom from God, *"If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who*

doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. For the doubter, being double-minded and unstable in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord” (James 1:5-8). He also describes to us what heavenly wisdom is, *“But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace” (James 3:17-18).* Heavenly wisdom will help us to be strong Christians that God wants us to be.

August 1881

In early August, Henry asked me if I would accompany his troops to scout a recent Apache Indian attack on a stagecoach further west of Coleman near a settlement known as Santa Angela. My job would be to supply spiritual guidance to the men and help with doctoring if necessary. I have learned a lot about medicine as I help Angela, so this seemed perfect to me since we needed the money for the new baby arriving in 6-8 weeks. Angela was not thrilled with the idea of me being gone, but she consented since she also knew we could use the extra money. She made me promise that I would return safely. I assured her that I would.

Paul was also asked to go as a scout and utilize his tracking skills. Jeremiah wanted to go, but he was too backed up with his duties with the local blacksmith, and he had some clerical duties to perform as well. So, I loaded up Rahab and met up with Henry and his troops at their camp on the edge of town. Our scouting party numbered 12 Texas Rangers and 8 volunteers. We discussed the details of the mission. We are to follow the trail from the stagecoach attack and find the Apache band. Our charge from Austin was to subdue the Apache warriors guilty of robbing and murdering the stagecoach personnel and passengers and bring them back to Fort Davis for trial.

The first night on the trail, the men asked me to read Psalm 18 for them. They love to hear King David’s song of praise to God for protecting him and his soldiers in battle, *“I love you, Lord, my strength. The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. I called to the Lord, who is worthy of praise, and I have been saved from my enemies. The cords of death entangled me; the torrents of destruction overwhelmed*

me. The cords of the grave coiled around me; the snares of death confronted me. In my distress I called to the Lord; I cried to my God for help. From his temple he heard my voice; my cry came before him, into his ears. The earth trembled and quaked, and the foundations of the mountains shook; they trembled because he was angry. Smoke rose from his nostrils; consuming fire came from his mouth, burning coals blazed out of it. He parted the heavens and came down; dark clouds were under his feet. He mounted the cherubim and flew; he soared on the wings of the wind. He made darkness his covering, his canopy around him - the dark rain clouds of the sky. Out of the brightness of his presence clouds advanced, with hailstones and bolts of lightning. The Lord thundered from heaven, the voice of the Most High resounded. He shot his arrows and scattered the enemy; with great bolts of lightning he routed them.... For whom is God besides the Lord? And who is the Rock except our God? It is God who arms me with strength and keeps my way secure. He trains my hands for battle; my arms can bend a bow of bronze. You make your saving help my shield, and your right hand sustains me; your help has made me great. You provide a broad path for my feet, so that my ankles do not give way.... You armed me with strength for battle; you humbled my adversaries before me. You made my enemies turn their backs in flight... Therefore I will praise you, Lord, among the nations; I will sing the praises of your name" (Psalm 18). The men love to hear that God fights with them when they fight to protect people from evil. God truly is our rock, our strength, and our deliverer when we go into battle for righteous reasons. We talked late into the night about how God protected the Israelite soldiers during the battles against impossible odds.

Several days out, Paul found the trail and we headed south toward the Mexican border. Henry and Paul had many suggestions for the troops in fighting the Apache warriors. Paul told us, "Apache warfare often involves ambushes. They are experts at hiding and striking without being seen. Arrows are often used because they are silent killers. If you see an arrow hit the ground, duck and cover as best you can because many more will follow. Also, Apache warriors are experts at close quarter knife fighting. We are to avoid this at all costs. If you end up in a one-on-one knife fight, you will not win." Henry chimed in, "That is why you are to have two fully loaded revolvers with you

at all times in case we are overrun. The only way you will win a knife fight is if you have a gun! We have superior fire power, so use it to avoid close quarter fighting.”

Paul returned to camp on the fifth day out and told us the Apache Warrior band was 3 miles to the west of us. There appeared to be 8 warriors and 20 or more horses. He was not spotted as the warriors were likely not expecting to be followed into this desolate area, so their guard was down. We mounted up and headed west. Henry sent 5 men to cover each flank and 10 of us proceeded straight for the band. I was to trail the team of 10 and be ready to doctor anyone injured. I was told to stay safe, so I could save others.

As we approached where Paul said they were camped, dozens of arrows arched high through the air and landed all around us. Surprisingly, no one was hit with the first attack. We dismounted and took cover as best we could. The best cover were some large rocks ahead of us where the Apache Braves obviously were hidden. They had spotted us and knew we were coming. It amazed me that I never saw one Brave during these showers of arrows. Another round of arrows hit two horses and one of the volunteers. I rushed to him to offer aid. In doing so, I was hit on the left ankle with an arrow. The arrow went straight through and did not hit a bone. The other man was not so lucky. He had an arrow embedded in his back.

The arrows were now coming straight at us rather than arching through the air, and we could see the Apache Braves as they briefly stood up to shoot. They were armed with rifles as well as their arrows. Our enemy had better cover, and they were well armed, so our situation did not look good. To our relief, both groups of troopers and volunteers sent to flank the Apache band had arrived and were doing their job. It did not take long to dispatch all of the warriors. They did not intend to be captured, and they each fought to the death. Fortunately for us, we did not have to fight them hand-to-hand.

We surveyed the damage. Two horses had minor injuries from the arrows, and I praise God that Rahab was not hit. Three of the volunteers were injured. I had an arrow through the ankle, one man had an arrow through his arm, and the third man had an arrow in his back. We cut the shafts off of all the arrows causing injury, and we bandaged the wounds. A doctor at the Fort would have to remove the arrowheads and

treat us for infections. We hastily buried the Apache Braves and loaded up to head for Fort Davis. The doctors there removed the arrowheads from the three volunteers and the two horses. Me and the man with the injured arm were able to travel. We were told to keep cool compresses on the wounds and give the injured limbs as much rest as possible. I would have to stay off of my left foot for a good amount of time. I knew Angela was going to be perturbed at my bad luck. The man with the wound to his back died shortly after the removal of the arrow. It had struck his spine and caused major damage to his nerve cord. We buried the man, Tom Allison, with full honors there at the fort.

We all returned to Coleman, but we did not receive a hero's welcome. Many of the community members voiced their opinions that we should not leave our own community to take care of someone else's business. If we were to risk our lives and our health protecting people, it should be done right here at home. Angela agreed. I settled into a sedentary life as my ankle healed. On August 24, I turned 30 years old. I sure didn't expect that I would celebrate my 30th birthday in bed!

September 1881

During the entire month of September, I was recovering from the ankle wound. I was able to walk short distances with the help of a cane or crutches, but I wasn't able to work. It drives me crazy when I cannot be actively working on projects that require hauling, lifting, digging, or building. I preached only at the Coleman Methodist Church services on Sundays. I was blessed by Jeremiah. He volunteered to carry messages to the communities on the circuit in my place throughout September. It is not easy for a preacher to turn his congregations over to another preacher, but I knew they were well cared for with Jeremiah.

October 1881

On October 4, 1881, we welcomed our first child into the world. God was watching over Angela and Angel as they brought a beautiful baby girl into the world. I was out in the yard trying not to faint. I entered the room when I heard the baby cry. She has her mother's green eyes and beautiful dark brown hair. She also has a beautiful

singing voice. She could be heard throughout the neighborhood as she cried out "Hello World!" As Angela held our little gift from God in her arms, she named the baby. Earlier Angela insisted on naming our first child after the one person whom she and I both owe our deepest gratitude for saving our lives.

So, meet Wilhemina Susannah... or as she is affectionately known...

"Willie Sue."

Matt Stephen

September 2024