

Jedediah Webb: Frontier Pastor

Chpt. 14

Winter 1884

Jeremiah, Paul, and I met up with Henry on the outskirts of town. He asked us if we were carrying weapons, and we all said we were. Henry told us that it was reported to him by several people who live east of town that there were some strangers roaming the area. One of the townspeople had talked to three men who told him that they were looking for law breakers who needed to be punished for their sins. I didn't like it that these men were strangers, but since they were only three in number I wasn't too concerned. Paul is an excellent tracker, and he picked up on their trail immediately. I kept Hustler close to us by constantly whistling for him to return. I think he was thoroughly enjoying getting out on the trail and doing some exploring. I know I felt the same way.

It wasn't long before Paul signaled us to hold up. Henry scouted ahead and returned. He reported to us, "Three men are up ahead. It looks like they are camping for the night. Follow me in and keep your hands on your guns." I fingered my revolver with my right hand, and I carried my Bible in my left hand holding it up high. Hopefully, this was a sign they would take as friendly, and things would stay calm. I was wrong.

Instantly, the three men drew their rifles and pointed them at us. Henry introduced himself and showed them his Texas Ranger badge. He told them to relax that we were just here to ask some questions. The three appeared quite angry that we had "barged in" on their privacy. Henry continued, "I suppose you know that you are camping on Frank Dolan's property. Did you ask his permission?" The apparent leader sneered and replied, "I suppose we didn't know that. Do you think he will forgive us? We are just passing through anyway." Henry asked for their names, where they were from, and what their purpose was here in Coleman County. My friends and I were ready to

aggressively defend ourselves if necessary. I think that they knew that, and they seemed ready to cooperate.

The leader lowered his rifle and invited us into the camp. "C'mon in, friends. We don't mean to appear unfriendly, but in these times we gotta be careful." Everyone put their guns down and gathered close. The leader introduced himself as Clifton Young. He said they were all from the Lampasas area, and they were looking for some men who had stolen property from some of the people in Lampasas County. Henry said that he would be glad to help them after he notified the Texas Rangers stationed in Lampasas of what was going on. Suddenly those boys got worried looks on their faces. I believe they had something to hide.

I was getting ready to lecture them about vigilante revenge when suddenly 8 men stormed into camp. They had us immediately covered with their guns. I could tell that Henry was mortified that he had let his guard down. They had us covered with their weapons, and we were entirely outnumbered. They took our weapons and moved us away from the center of camp to tie us up. Hustler was snarling, and one of the men swiped at his head with the butt of his rifle. Hustler was knocked down...still breathing...but not moving. They led Rahab and the other horses away from the campfire and toward where their horses were tied down.

I knew that once they tied us up, we would be "goners." I am always imagining different scenarios and devising ways to get out of predicaments. I had already planned this particular scenario out. As we were passing the campfire, I jumped into the fire and began kicking the logs in every direction. That action took everyone by surprise enough so that they were fleeing in all directions, and they began shooting towards me. Henry, Jeremiah and Paul instantly turned on the men who were escorting them. They were able to wrangle their weapons away from them and began returning fire. Hustler sprang into action and tore into the man nearest to him. That little rascal was playing possum the whole time. Rahab raised a ruckus and began to kick anyone within reach.

We scrambled for cover as the vigilante gang was gathering their wits about them and beginning to fight back. I was relieved that I was not hit by any of their bullets, but Henry was not so lucky. I could see blood seeping throughout his shirt. We all crouched

behind some trees as the firefight intensified. I could see that several of the gang members were moving to flank us and get us into a crossfire. There were not enough of us to prevent that from happening. I asked God for a miracle, and one came riding in. Matías, his three brothers, and several of their ranch hands rode up pouring fire into the vigilante gang. Several were hit and the rest hightailed it as fast as they could jump a horse. Some took off on foot as Rahab wouldn't let them get close to their horses. Some of Matías' men took chase, and Matías walked up to us smiling. "I was really sad that you didn't invite me along for the fun," he said. "So I took it upon myself to trail you and catch up. I guess we helped you a little, huh?"

Several significant things happened that day. Matías solidified my loyalty to him forever. I was given the nickname of "Fire Walker." Henry was wounded but just a "scratch" on his arm. The skirmish went down in history as the "Five-Minute Vigilante Battle" as the entire encounter took less than five minutes. When we got back to Coleman, we brought with us a few extra horses, five wounded vigilantes, a lot of camping gear, a slightly wounded dog, and a wounded Texas Ranger hero. Overall it was a good day. At least until Angela got me behind a closed door.

Spring 1885

It is May and my brother, Jimmy, and Angela's sister, Ruth, were ready to walk the blessed aisle of matrimony. My family from Dublin came in for the ceremony. It was good to see my father though he was looking a little worn down. Saphronia was an amazing mother of the bride. She and Ruth did a great job of planning and implementing the wedding ceremony and reception. Mother was the perfect mother of the groom. She took care of preparing the meal for the rehearsal, and she flitted about getting reacquainted with everyone. Ruth was a beautiful bride, and Jimmy was the typically nervous groom. Willie Sue was the flower girl along with Ruth's dog, Belle. Judith was the stunningly beautiful maid of honor, and several of Ruth's and Jimmy's friends were bridesmaids and groomsmen. I, of course, was the best man along with being the presiding preacher.

Everything was perfect, except maybe that Ruth's dress was a little tight around the midsection. We found out later that Ruth was already with child (a couple of months

along as far as Angela could calculate). There is an old adage, "On the frontier, it is best not to get too serious with math when determining when the baby is due." It will appear to the community that this baby was born at least two months prematurely. This is a problem in that Jimmy and Ruth will become a major topic of gossip for those who love to spread rumors, and this concerns me - especially since we are talking about my brother!

God laid down many laws in the book of Leviticus for us to follow. God fully defined sexual sin in chapter 18 of the Book of Leviticus to guide us in keeping our sexual relations holy. God tells us through the prophet Isaiah that He rejoices over us as we follow His will, *"As a young man marries a young woman, so will your Builder marry you; as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you"* (Isaiah 62:5). Paul gives us further guidelines on how to keep our sexuality within God's plan, *"Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral"* (Hebrews 13:4). Although the world is making its own rules about what is acceptable in sexual relations, Paul tells us to stay within God's will, *"Since sexual immorality is occurring, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman with her own husband"* (I Corinthians 7:2).

Our Easter celebration on April 5th was one for the records. We held a community-wide Easter Egg hunt on Saturday for the first time in Coleman. We had over 100 children in attendance. People from all over the county attended the hunt, and we held a Dinner-on-the-Grounds at our church. The next day, we celebrated the risen Christ at our church service. Many people stayed overnight from the egg hunt and celebrated with us on Sunday, and yes, we feasted again. The sanctuary was not yet finished, so we held the service outside. God gave us a glorious sunrise that morning to emphasize the beauty and wonder of that morning some 2,000 years ago when the tomb where they laid Jesus' body after his crucifixion was found empty. That empty tomb symbolizes Jesus' victory over death. We too, achieve victory over death when we accept Jesus' gift of dying for us as a perfect sacrifice for our sins. Jesus saved us. We

are now redeemed of our sins. We are forgiven. We are united with God forever. We will all spend eternity in a perfect heaven with all of the Christians who passed on before us!

Summer 1885

Henry is recovering nicely from his battle wound. His “scratch” as he described it was really a bullet hole through his shoulder. It would take him some time to recover. He was attended throughout his recovery by Matías’ sister, Victoria. Those two seemed to be getting along really well, and they stayed close together. Many an eyebrow was lifted at seeing this since many Texans still harbor grudges and hate against people of Mexico. Both sides do not want to forgive each other for the murders of their brothers in the War for Texas Independence over 50 years ago.

God makes it clear that we are all brothers and sisters as children of God. The Apostle Paul tells us that none of us are better than others, *“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28)*. The Apostle John tells us that we are not to judge others who appear different, *“Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment” (John 7:24)*. John gives a strong warning of hating others, *“But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes” (1 John 2:11)*. To live within God’s will is to figure out how to love our neighbors.

Matías told us that his father, Miguel Diego Ruiz Castillo, is an old-fashioned man securely tied to culture and tradition. He would never allow Victoria to be married to anyone other than a Mexican. He would not accept the marriage of one of his daughters to Henry or even to be romanced by him. Who Victoria marries would be decided by him and his wife, Maria. In many cultures, women are treated as property. Matías tells me that his father believes that Victoria belongs to him forever, and he will make all of her decisions for her. God told us when he created Adam and Eve that his design is that children leave their families to create their own family, *“That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24)*.

Once married and becoming “one flesh” the husband and wife are now responsible for creating a new family for God to love. If Henry and Victoria decide to become one in God’s eyes, it will not be an easy trail to blaze, but Henry told me it will be worth the effort.

My best friend, Jeremiah, is facing some issues of his own. He is strongly considering starting a church in Coleman instead of riding a circuit. He has numerous people in Coleman who are asking him to remain there permanently as their preacher. Jeremiah is also very protective of his daughter, Elizabeth, who is still being harassed and threatened by some local boys. He has faced prejudice all of his life, and it hurts him to see his children become victims of that senseless hate. He has confronted some of these boys on several occasions, and the last confrontation led to him defending himself from physical aggression. He was jumped by four boys, and before he was able to walk away, all four boys were sporting some physical and emotional bruises.

Summertime always seems to bring someone or something interesting to town. In July, a man named Jonah Harris hit the outskirts of town with a huge tent. His aim was to set up a saloon for thirsty cattle drivers as they made their way from South Texas to Abilene. The town leadership was not against this. I suspect that some of our townspeople were thirsty as well. They directed Jonah to move his tent a full two miles south of town, with the logic that if trouble broke out it wouldn’t disturb the peace of the townsfolk. The saloon opened up without incident, and I am told that the whisky and beer were quite tasty. I did not oppose this idea as it would provide a place for trail drivers to gather outside of town. In the past we have had to deal with rowdy behavior from some of those drivers passing through our town and looking for bawdy entertainment.

However, after a couple of weeks I noticed that another large tent had been erected close to the saloon. I was told that it was an Inn of sorts for men to eat and sleep...complete with company from “soiled doves.” Upon investigation, Jonah said, “Yeah, a friend of mine, Miss Candy, asked if she could set up her business down here to help entertain the trail drivers.” I was about to tell him that she would need permission from the town leadership, when I heard a ruckus and observed many townspeople

walking toward us. They were angry and shouting, "We will not tolerate a Hell's-Half-Acre here in Coleman County...let the sinners head up to Abilene for that!"

Some of the men began to tear down the tents. I stopped them from doing so, as I observed some of Jonah's helpers were arming themselves and preparing for an all-out skirmish. I addressed the townspeople, "Now, you are taking a good stand against what is happening here. We know that God has given us directions on how to handle drunkenness and prostitution. Paul gave us rules to live by, '*Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy*' (**Romans 13:13**). And Paul warned us of the dire consequences of not following God's ordinances, '*Envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God*' (**Galatians 5:21**). Let us not take this into our own hands. We will take this issue to the town leadership and abide by their decision. God would have us settle this in an orderly way."

At a town hall meeting that night, Jonah and Miss Candy pled their case. The townspeople stated that alcohol is a problem for communities. They quoted King Solomon, "*Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise*" (**Proverbs 20:1**). Mrs. Smythe, a member of the American Temperance Society, held strong views about alcohol and prostitution, "Yes, strong drink is a problem to be monitored, but a brothel will never be tolerated!" The leadership voted to evict Miss Candy and issue a strong warning to Jonah to follow the guidelines given to him to follow in order to protect the peace of the town. Sheriff Price told us that he and his deputies would keep a wary eye on Jonah's business dealings.

Fall 1885

Along with a bounteous harvest for this growing season, the community is celebrating the finished construction of the new sanctuary for the Methodist church. There is a lot to be thankful for. In mid-October it is too cool to hold a Dinner-on-the-Grounds, but there is now ample room inside the building to hold a feast for the whole community. Everyone brought bounty from their crops and shared with one another. We

held an auction to raise money for several charities around town including the orphanage.

Several weeks later, we arranged a Halloween event for the children. It included costume contests, hayrides, games to play, treats to eat, and some scary stories for the older kids. All Hallow's Eve was originally a festival of recognizing that spirits come out on that night to roam the Earth, and people protect themselves by wearing disguises to hide their identities. Some people use this time to follow the occult and do evil things. I like the way the church moved to counteract All Hallow's Eve by creating All Saints Day on the following day. This is a celebration of recognizing the saints who went before us worshipping God and teaching us to love and follow His will. We use this Sunday service to show thankfulness for our ancestors and personal saints who paved the way for us to become Christians. We call out the name and toll a bell for each person who passed into eternity during the previous year.

Right after Halloween and All Saints Day, Angela was approached by Rachel. She told Angela that the three Henderson children have missed over two weeks of school. When called upon, Mrs. Henderson said that they were all sick and trying to get over colds and fever. Rachel asked Angela to make a home visit to see if doctoring was needed for those children. Angela readily agreed, and she asked Angel to accompany her. I asked Angela if she needed me to go along. Tuesdays are relatively slow days for me, and I thought I might be useful to visit with the children. Angela turned me down and told me to get to work.

Upon arrival at the Henderson home, Mrs. Henderson looked haggard and worn. She had circles under her eyes, and visible bruises on her arms. The children did not appear sick but showed signs of malnourishment. They each had some bruises on their arms and legs. Angela immediately suspected there was some abuse going on in the family. She asked Mrs. Henderson if that was true, but Mrs. Henderson refused to answer the question. She said that she has been ill and not able to care for the children as she would like. Angela was ready to ask about Mr. Henderson when he came crashing through the door yelling at Mrs. Henderson, "What the devil is going on in here? I thought I told you not to invite guests over to the house!"

Angela replied to Mr. Henderson, "She didn't invite me over. I came on my own. I was just about to take your wife and children to my office for a physical inspection and some possible medical treatment." Mr. Henderson was livid. "How dare you come into my home and make demands. Leave now!" The smell of alcohol was strong on his breath. Angela said, "We will leave just as soon as we gather some things for Mrs. Henderson and your children." With that Mr. Henderson rushed toward Angela. "You have meddled with my family, and you are going to pay. Too bad your men ain't here to protect you."

As he scrambled toward Angela, she fell backwards towards the fireplace and grabbed a good-sized log. He reached out to grab her and suddenly felt a terrible pain coming from his shin. Angela had clubbed him with the log. As he fell, she hit him in the other leg. He screamed in pain and began to crawl toward Angela. He stopped crawling when Angel appeared and smashed his hand against the floor with a log of her own. He rolled onto his back crying in pain. He was reaching for his rifle with his good hand, and Angel took quick aim and crushed it as well.

Angel then jumped upon his chest and took aim at his head. Angela very calmly took hold of Angel's hand and said, "He is down. Let's take care of the family." They gathered some things, loaded the entire family onto the wagon, and headed into town. Mr. Henderson was curled up and whimpering. Mrs. Henderson and the children didn't seem to care that he was hurt. After hearing this story, I believe he was lucky to be alive! Once in her office, Angela and Angel bandaged Mr. Henderson, and they summoned the Sheriff. They pressed charges for assault, and Mr. Henderson was taken to a nice jail cell.

Mrs. Henderson and the children were made comfortable in the church until decisions could be made to ensure their safety. You could see the relief on everyone's faces...free from the worry of a man they once loved but now feared. I am proud to say that a home for battered families was born that day in Coleman County. Angela, Angel, and Rachel with the help of citizens across the County began formulating plans for a safe place for abused women and children.

Winter 1885

This Christmas, our community put on a Christmas pageant. Elizabeth and Tanis produced and directed a Christmas play starring the children of the community. It was a rousing success. The parents were all busting with pride as they watched their children's performances. And yes, Santa Claus appeared with a huge bag full of toys and sweet treats. Willie Lockhart would have loved it. We all miss him. I wish he could have met Willie Sue and Henry Augustus. They are alive because of him. I think about him often. I keep thinking about what his face-to-face visit with Jesus must have been like. Guilt plagued Willie all of his life until he gave his life to Christ, but I know he was guilt free when he sat and talked to Jesus in the garden of heaven.

It looks like an interesting winter is upon us. There is word from up in Abilene about the onset of some more range wars. Water and grass are hard to find, and farmers, cattlemen, and sheep herders are at odds. Henry and several other Texas Rangers have gone on a scout to determine the status of the range wars up north. Henry did not ask me to attend the scout as it would be too dangerous, and the weather would possibly be extreme and the camping too uncomfortable. I have mixed emotions about not being invited to go along. Angela tells me to get over it and spend my time preparing for the coming winter.

There are signs that a hard winter is approaching: extra heavy coats on livestock and wild animals, heavy bark on trees, and aching knees and wrist joints. We are all preparing our houses and barns to get ready for the cold. I reinforced the barn with additional straw and mud for insulation to keep the livestock comfortable. Rahab, Sadie, and Buster appreciated that. A few days after Christmas, a blizzard struck the area. Folks who have lived in the area all their lives say they have never seen anything like it. Everyone pitched in to help those people who were not prepared for such an onslaught of nature. Temperatures dropped to below zero. Strong winds, sleet, and snow slapped us from every direction. It is dangerous to go outside even to visit the outhouses. We know that many people are going to become isolated and might need help. As bad as the weather is, Sheriff Price and his deputies check on people in the outlying areas.

The community canceled school and closed many of the businesses until the storm would subside. We opened up churches in town to house those who needed warmth and food. Angela, Willie Sue, and Henry moved into the church with me to help take care of people. Jimmy and Ruth said they would watch over our livestock at our place while we were gone. I stabled Rahab and Hustler in the livery in town in case I needed them. All was going well until Rachel ran into the church. She was in tears and could hardly speak. Once we got her calmed down enough to tell us what was wrong, she told me the words I never wanted to hear....

Jeremiah has disappeared!

Matt Stephen

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