

# Jedediah Webb: Frontier Pastor

## Chapter 17

### November 1887

Texas Ranger Henry Armstrong received news from Austin that the Chiricahua Apache Tribe has begun attacking settlers along the Texas-Mexico border. This was a surprise to me because I had heard that Geronimo, Chief of the Chiricahua Tribe, and his remaining warriors had surrendered in September of last year, and they were sent to Fort Marion, Florida. However, Henry informed us that a small group of Chiricahua warriors known as the "Nameless Ones" had escaped and fled to Mexico and settled in the Sierra Madre Mountains. They had remained silent until recently when they raided several ranches on both sides of the border. The Texas Rangers named the Apache subchief in charge of this band, "Little Nache," after Chief Naiche who had surrendered with Chief Geronimo. Little Nache (or "Mischief-maker") was named after a trickster figure in Apache mythology who often caused chaos and confusion, so we knew he would live up to his name and be difficult to subdue. He was frustrating settlers and the military on both sides of the border. The mission of the Texas Rangers and the U.S. Army was to eliminate this threat to both Texas and Mexico by any means possible. I knew that meant "Don't worry about taking prisoners."

Henry asked me to accompany him as the chaplain of his troops to help keep their morale and courage up. Was this to be my last excursion with the Texas Rangers? Was I getting too old for this? I do know that Rahab is too old to go on this excursion. She just turned 17 years old and is now considered a senior in age - equivalent to a 60-year-old human. Older horses begin to show signs of aging by the time they hit their teenage years, usually starting around 15. They will sprout gray hairs around their eyes and muzzle. Rahab was gray and beautiful to me, and it was time to leave her at home. To save time and wear and tear on the horses, we will take a train from Lampasas to Austin then to San Antonio then to Del Rio. I selected one of my father's American Quarter horses, JW (named after my father, James William), to go with me. He is 8 years old and smart as a horse can be. He will not do as well on the train ride as Rahab

would, but he is stronger than Rahab and will manage the strain of hunting down Nache and his band.

Angela consented to my decision to accompany the Rangers, and she made me promise to stay safe and not do anything rash. Jeremiah's son, David, who helps with the ministry of our Methodist church, will take care of the minister duties while I am gone. I can count on him. Like his father, he is becoming a strong and well-loved preacher and pastor for the congregation. I see a lot of Jeremiah in his son, David. He is knowledgeable, caring, and speaks with fire from his heart. I hope to keep him as an associate pastor as long as I can until he is ready for his own church.

As we were preparing to leave for Lampasas, Matías received a telegram from his father informing him that their ranch at Garza Galan Mexico just south of Del Rio on the Texas-Mexico border had been attacked. Several men were killed, but his family members all survived. Matías received permission from Ranger Henry for him and three of his brothers to accompany the Rangers on the 230-mile trip. Henry swore us all in as temporary Rangers, and we headed east to Lampasas to catch the train. While travelling the rails, Henry reminded us of Apache warfare and the strategies we would use to corner Nache and his braves. I had brushed up earlier on my fighting and defensive skills, and I rode a fast horse. I was ready.

Once we arrived in Del Rio, we saddled up and headed toward Matías' father's ranch. Evidence of massive destruction was present. All but the main house had been put to the torch indicating that the final stand was held at the main house. Most of the cattle and horses were gone, and many of the outbuildings had been burned to the ground. Senor Castillo told us that only two days ago a band of at least 50 braves attacked them at daybreak. They were completely taken by surprise as there had been no previous reports of marauding bands in the area. During the attack, the women and children were hidden in the basement while the men made a final stand in and around the main house. Once the Apache warriors rounded up whatever they could steal, they headed west toward the mountains. They did not take any captives with them. The Apache warriors brutally dispatched any of the Mexican wounded they came across, and they carried their own dead and wounded with them back to the mountains.



Henry told us the best chance we have to deal with them was to catch up with them before they get to their stronghold in the mountains. Matías' father, Senor Castillo, wanted to join us as we tracked the Apache band, but Henry stressed that he was needed at the ranch to protect the family. The Ranger force was 35 members strong, and we felt that was good odds. We were all anxious to avenge the dead and rid the area of this constant threat to the peace and prosperity that settlers had worked so hard to attain. The trip would be about 45-50 miles to the mountains or a 2-3-day ride depending on speed we are able to sustain.

We caught up with them at the foothills of the Sierra Madre Mountains. We were informed that we would be joined by 50 U.S. Army troops coming down from Fort Davis in the north and 150 Mexican troops coming up from Monterrey in the south. As we all approached, we saw that we had them trapped against the mountains. As they realized that they were trapped, many of the braves surrendered, but some fought to the death.

It was an easy fight if you can call any battle easy. However, I did manage to have an arrow glance off my backside. Mind you, I was not running away...someone came up behind me and shot an arrow at my back. An angel must have been watching over me because I turned when I heard a noise, and that pivot saved my life. It was a scratch, but it would need attention to keep it from getting infected. Angela would not be happy with this. I promised her I would not get hurt.

The U.S. Army force took prisoners into custody for trial or to transport to the reservation in Oklahoma where the remaining members of the Chiricahua Apache Tribe now reside. The Mexican Army followed into the mountains those who still resisted, and the Texas Rangers were content to turn their captives over to the U.S. Army and head back to Del Rio. Hostilities with the American Indian tribes have mostly come to a halt here in Texas, and there is now a relatively peaceful relationship with most of the Native American tribes in the U.S. Anyone who now says, "The only good Indian is a dead Indian" has never met my friend Paul and his family. Also, any Texan who hates all Mexicans has never met Matías and his family. Good people come in all sizes, shapes, religions, race, and color of skin. For that matter, so do evil people. The only true difference among people is whether goodness or evil dwells in their hearts.

On the way back to Del Rio after the skirmish, we found that Matías' father and two of his brothers were wounded by a smaller Apache war band who had doubled back to steal anything they had left earlier. Matías' father's men successfully ran them off, but at the cost of some severe injuries. Matías was sick with worry for his parents, so we loaded Senor and Senora Castillo in a wagon to take them back to Texas for rest and healing. Matías' brothers stayed with the ranch to rebuild and tend to the wounded ranch hands. Senor Castillo was anxious for him and his wife to be put into Angela's healing hands. Matías put them up at his ranch, and we had many opportunities to visit and get to know his parents much better. Henry was especially glad to spend more time with them. He hoped it would give him the chance he needed to win them over so he could marry Victoria.

### **Spring 1888**

After the Easter celebration, it was time for me to turn my attention to looking over the towns to the west that the Methodist Conference required me to examine for a possible preaching circuit. Henry, David, and Paul all wanted to accompany me on this journey to explore this new area of Texas. I believe they just wanted to go with me to protect me from harm. I did not protest that, and I welcomed their company. To Rahab's delight, I saddled her up and called for Hustler. He showed no interest in coming, so I summoned his son, Samson. He was born about two years ago, and he was up for the adventure. He is a large, powerful watchdog and quite fearless when it comes to protecting people who belong to him.

The area of Paint Rock, San Angelo, Big Spring, and Sweet Water is considered the new edge of the Texas wilderness. However, it would not be wilderness for long as the railroad has already made an appearance through Sweet Water and Big Spring. During this expedition, no dangerous incident occurred. We wanted to travel by horse to experience what a preacher would go through to ride this circuit. We spent a lot of time camping in between the towns, and the time spent with Henry, David, and Paul was rewarding. We all became even closer friends with one another.

Paint Rock is a quiet, small community of about 250 people located west of Coleman at the junction of the Concho River and Hog Creek. By 1884 it had become a



shipping center for wool, buffalo hides, pecans, and mutton. Cattle ranching and cotton farming were being introduced to the community. We learned that a Presbyterian church was organized in the community in 1881 and a Baptist church in 1886. There are a few die-hard Methodists who want to get a Methodist church started as soon as possible.

Our next stop, San Angelo, was neither small nor quiet. San Angelo began as a small community to support the soldiers at nearby Fort Concho which was established in 1867. It reminded me of Abilene in a lot of ways. It began as a wide-open town filled with saloons, prostitution houses, and gambling establishments. Soon legitimate businesses began to appear to support the needs of the soldiers and the growing town. Cattle drives in the 1870s and 1880s came through San Angelo on their way north to Oklahoma and Kansas. A Methodist church has already been established along with a competing Baptist Church. I could see that one day soon, there would be enough people to establish a second Methodist church.

Sweet Water began as a community to support buffalo hunters. It grew considerably but has lost some of its population. The townspeople have seen some tough times recently. They survived a killing blizzard followed by a long drought. These people are resilient and are ready to expand their town. They see that churches are necessary for spiritual growth, and they are willing to build a structure which could house shared churches.

Big Spring is a large town and still growing in numbers. The Texas and Pacific Railroad has been established in the area, and the community has blossomed, expanding the town to over 1,000 souls. A Methodist church has already been established, and soon the town will be able support a second Methodist church.

My report to the Methodist Conference did not recommend that we create a circuit for these towns. The communities are spread too far apart for a single pastor to manage on horseback, and the towns were large enough to support their own church and preacher. I suppose that the days of the traveling-preacher circuit rider have come to a close in Texas.

## Summer 1888

Angela officially became a Doctor of Dental Medicine this month. The town barber asked her to take over his “teeth-pulling business” so he could focus on cutting hair. In many cases, all a person can do is pull the tooth that is causing pain. Angela studied up on how to help people with their oral hygiene. She prescribed “chew sticks” for people to scrub their teeth with and showed them how to swab their mouths with salt water to help prevent decay of the teeth. She investigated the use of ether and nitrous oxide (some people call it “laughing gas”) to help ease the pain of dental procedures, and she decided to contact the American Dental Association to send someone to Coleman to teach her proper use of these procedures. Taking on dental treatments tripled her workload, so she is teaching several people to function as dental assistants.

One day a man came in and asked for the laughing gas. He enjoyed the gas so much that he laughed, told jokes, and talked throughout the examination. When it came time to work on his teeth, he would not stop talking. He also made a pass at Angela. He told her how beautiful she was and suggested that she run away with him. Later when he regained his senses, he was mortified that he had made a move on the preacher’s wife. The man apologized profusely and begged for forgiveness. Out of embarrassment he quit coming to church until I visited him and explained that he is forgiven and that laughing gas makes people do strange things...much like drinking and ingesting opium or laudanum. I gave him one of my favorite scriptures where John tells us, *“If we confess our sins, he (God) is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9)*. Yes, receiving forgiveness is that simple...but the repentance needs to be sincere. I believe in this case the confession and repentance were authentic.

In June, Henry and Victoria celebrated their wedding. Henry had become good friends with his in-laws Miguel and Rosalia, and he received their blessings to marry their daughter. This was a monumental decision as there is still animosity between Anglo and Mexican people in Texas. The decades of war between the two cultures have left many physical and emotional wounds. Some people are ready to move forward in their relationships with people of other cultures, but many people in the community were



incensed that this was occurring. Both cultures found it hard to accept the other culture for murdering some of their ancestors. It was wrong in their eyes that an Anglo Texan should marry a Mexican senorita. However, people's objections did not stop the celebration from happening. A magnificent Mexican wedding and fiesta were thrown for the newlyweds. The celebration began with a traditional Catholic ceremony in the Catholic church. The local priest presided while I was invited to play a small part in the ceremony. The marriage ceremony ended with the traditional Lasso Ceremony. After the vows were taken, a lasso was placed on the bride and groom's shoulders, and they were tied together... forever! The smaller children were bedded down in corners of the church while food, drink, music, dancing, and fellowship went deep into the night. Both Texan and Mexican cultures were well-represented, and the Armstrong/Castillo Wedding became a local legend known for its nonstop celebrating over several days.

After the couple left for their honeymoon, I could not help but think about how much fun Jeremiah would have had at Henry's wedding. I continued to self-reflect regarding the loss of Jeremiah and my hate for those who killed him. I want to forgive the men who brutally killed Jeremiah and his daughter Elizabeth, but so far, I cannot. I keep hearing Paul say, "*Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse*" (**Romans 12:14**). I also keep hearing Jesus say to me over and over, "*Love your enemies*" (**Matthew 5:44**). I also hear John telling us that hate leads to darkness in our lives, "*Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates a brother or sister is still in the darkness. Anyone who loves their brother and sister lives in the light, and there is nothing in them to make them stumble. But anyone who hates a brother or sister is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness. They do not know where they are going, because the darkness has blinded them*" (**1John 2:9-11**).

I knew I still had a long way to go in achieving perfection in love in the category of loving our enemies. There is so much hate between people: Rebs and Yanks, Mexicans and Anglos, Indians, and intruders on their lands. There is so much fighting and killing everywhere. One day things will be different. We are promised that the world will be changed and there will be no more hate, war, killings, envy, lust, or jealousy, "*And the wolf will dwell with the lamb, And the leopard will lie down with the young goat, And*

*the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; And a little boy will lead them. Also, the cow and the bear will graze, their young will lie down together, And the lion will eat straw like the ox. The nursing child will play by the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child will put his hand on the viper's den. They will not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain. For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea" (Isaiah 11:6-9).* Once Jesus returns and establishes the eternal kingdom on Earth, everything will be peaceful and perfect. This is hard for us to imagine today as we are surrounded by darkness and imperfection. God tells us that the light He will provide will give us the peace we long for, *"He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away" (Revelation 21:4).*

### **Fall 1888**

Range Wars can get started quite easily in this part of Texas. Most skirmishes take place over water and land rights. Windmills and barbed fences have made "cutting up the plains" possible which makes it difficult for those driving cattle to market to make their way to the stockyards. Fencing off land can lead to arguments, but fencing off water can lead to bloodshed. The western code that people in Texas follow is that water is a rare commodity and should be shared. Matías says that the Mexican code is that water belongs to a region not to one individual. Because of that code, Matías does not fence off the water on his land; however, he did build fences to contain his prize bulls and cows. He was using fences to protect his breeding stock of Angus cattle imported from Scotland - a new hardy breed of cattle for the Texas climate. He was proud of the work he had done in this area, and he wanted his cattle protected. Although he had put up fencing, he was more than willing to allow trail drivers permission to cut through his land...but not to help themselves to his cattle.

One day in September one of Matías' ranch hands came riding up to the sheriff's office to ask for help, "Someone has stolen prize breeding bulls and cows from Matías' ranch, and he and some of his men have gone after them. It looks like there are at least 12-15 thieves, and they are headed east." Sheriff Price jumped into action and summoned three deputies to accompany him. I, as well as Texas Ranger Henry



Armstrong, Paul, and Talako volunteered to go with him. We did not really need Paul's tracking skills as the thieves were herding cattle, but he insisted he wanted to help. Henry said, "My brother-in-law is putting himself at risk. He is now my family, and I will back his play." I came along because I just wanted to see justice done....and to have another adventure. Angela was away on her doctor's visits, so I left a message for her that I would be back soon. I did not mention that I would be chasing armed bandits. I quickly saddled up my horse, JW, and headed out behind the sheriff and the posse.

Horse thieves are hanged because a man's horse is his lifeline for survival, and maximum penalties are handed out for ruining a man's life. Cattle thieves on the other hand are generally not hanged, but they are brought to justice. Our mission was to follow Matías and provide support for him and his men as they sought retribution for the theft of his property. The thieves did not have a big head start and driving cattle is a slow process, so we caught up with Matías and his men quickly. As we spotted them, we saw that they were under fire from overwhelming odds. Matías and his four men were pinned down and taking fire from at least 15 men or more. We figured our help would at least even the odds.

Sheriff Price and his deputies rode into their weak right flank while Paul and Talako rode into their left flank, dismounted, and poured in fire from behind some trees. Henry and I rode straight to Matías and his men. We leaped from our horses and set up about 15 yards away from Matías and his men so as not to put us all into one target area.

Our sudden appearance took the thieves by surprise, but they showed no signs of wanting to run. I was curious as to why they continued to hold their ground even though the odds had evened up; however, there was no time to sit and ruminate on the subject. We were all pouring lead into the air and reloading as fast as we could. I could see about a half dozen of the thieves lying still on the ground either dead or gravely wounded, and it looked like two of Matías' men were wounded. Henry, our best marksman, was creating some real damage. He rarely seemed to miss a target by more than a few inches. That was enough to keep the enemies' heads down. Paul and Talako

were well-protected behind trees and holding their own. We seemed to be at a stalemate now. Neither side was getting ahead on the body count.

The answer to why the enemy were not withdrawing came soon enough when a bullet - coming from behind - hit the tree next to me. I whirled around to see four or five men coming up behind us. These men must have been elsewhere when the fighting started, and now they came to join the fight. Henry yelled, "Ok, Jed, here is your chance to be a hero. Turn around and cover me from behind." My first thought was, "Who...me?" But there was no time to think - only to react. Bullets were pinging all around us coming from two different directions. I pulled my colt from my holster and laid it and the scattergun nearby for close fighting. My rifle spoke some nasty words to the men running up behind us. Two men fell, but the other three kept coming. My scattergun had something to say at the same moment that an impact whirled me around to face Henry. I was hit in the left shoulder, and my left side went numb.

Only one man was standing after the scattergun had done its work. Henry nonchalantly turned his colt around, shot the remaining man, and went back to work in the other direction with his rifle. At this point, the enemy saw their ambush had failed, and they turned their tails and ran. Some of them took rounds to the back as a result. There was no time for heroics such as "I cannot shoot a man in the back." A man downed from behind meant he was no longer going to shoot at us. As the last man disappeared, the scene fell silent.

A quick survey determined that two of Matías' men were wounded - one badly hit. Paul was bleeding from his thigh, and I was hit in the shoulder. Talako was limping because he turned his ankle leaping from his horse. Everyone else was shaken but not physically injured. We began to celebrate the victory until we noticed that Sheriff Price and his men were missing. We found them all near where the enemy staged their fire fight. Sheriff Price and his men had remained mounted and charged in to get close to the enemy. They took the brunt of the fire. Sheriff Price and one of his deputies lay dead. The other two deputies were wounded but not mortally it seemed. Two of their horses were dead and the other two were wounded. We quickly dealt with all our wounded - including the horses.



Matías looked over the enemy dead and wounded to make sure no one was playing possum. The enemy numbered twelve dead, four wounded, and the rest had mounted their horses and ran for their lives. Henry said he would interrogate the wounded to find out the names of those who got away. The Texas Rangers would be notified to be on the lookout for them. As he bandaged my shoulder, Henry thanked me for saving his life. "If you had not been behind me stopping the men running up on us, we would both be dead from bullets from either direction." With all the times that Henry saved my life, I guess it became my turn to return the favor.

We were trying to determine how we would get all the wounded back to town when Matías' brothers, Luis and Santiago, came riding up in a wagon. They were relieved to see their brother and his men still alive. All of us grieved over Sheriff Price and his deputy, Carl Richardson, who died in the battle. We loaded the dead and the wounded up in the wagon. We left the cattle that the thieves were driving scattered to the winds, but Matías rounded up his prize bulls and cows to take back home. Henry collected any identification he could from the dead cattle thieves, and we left their bodies to the mercy of the scavengers.

Back in town, Angela and Angel sprang into action to doctor the wounded. They treated us in order of severity of the wounds. I was close to the head of the line as the hole in my shoulder was bleeding badly. I teasingly told Angela that I wanted some laughing gas. She was in no mood for humor – especially mine. I knew that we were soon going to have another of those discussions where she makes it clear that I need to stop engaging myself in gun battles. I think I will listen to her a little harder this time.

Angel tended to Paul's wounded thigh and Talako's sprained ankle. Angela removed bullets from the deputies and Matías' men. Most bullet wounds are usually fatal because infection sets in after the removal of the bullet. Angela had studied the reasons for infection, and she had devised ways to prevent infection through sterilization of hands and utensils before surgery. All of us who were wounded were bedded down in the church parsonage which served well as a hospital ward. The two deputies and Matías' two men were in guarded condition, so several nurses-in-training

were assigned to watch over us all. I prayed with the men for God to send them guardian angels to protect them through the next few days and nights.

Matías explained to us what happened to begin the fire fight. He and his four men followed the trail of the cattle drive that passed by their ranch. They came upon three men who were trailing behind the main herd. They were leading three cows and a bull from Matías' prize stock. Matías called out to them and told them that those were his cattle. One of the men told them that the cattle had joined their cattle along the trail. Matías knew that they had been stolen, but he was not anxious to start a fight. He thanked the men for holding onto them and ordered his men to head the cattle back home. As they moved toward the prize cattle, five or six men rode up from the main herd up ahead. They said not a word but started shooting. One of Matías' men fell from his horse, and Matías and his men let loose on them. The thieves retreated a few yards to the cover of some trees and continued to fire upon Matías and his men. The two sides were trading shots when we rode up. Matías was thankful for our help, "We were pinned down and our chances were slim to none when you rode up. Thank you for risking your lives to help." I replied that this is what friends do for one another, "You would have done the same for us." Henry chimed in, "We are family now."

A lot happened over the next few weeks. Sheriff Price and Deputy Richardson were buried with honors. Henry Armstrong was assigned as interim sheriff for Coleman County until an election could be held in the spring. All of us wounded in the skirmish healed to a point where we could move out of the parsonage hospital ward and back to our respective homes. Paul's thigh wound seemed to take on miraculous healing. Within two weeks, one could barely even see the scar where the bullet entered his thigh. Paul attributed the healing to Commanche poultices and the healing powers of Jesus Christ. It took a while for Angela to want to speak to me in a gentle tone. She was quite angry that I "took off to have some fun with guns" without telling her what was happening. I apologized profusely and promised never to do that again. She gave me a look I will never forget, and she said, "Ok, but if you continue to deceive me, your children, and yourself...you will one day end up all by yourself." These words struck me deep in my



soul. I understood that what she was saying was that I must change my ways to keep my family. That gives a man a lot to think about.

### **Winter 1888**

As a result of being assigned the position of interim sheriff of Coleman County, Henry decided to resign from the Texas Rangers – at least temporarily. As interim sheriff, Henry was challenged by no one. In fact, some of the county's worst degenerates hot-footed it out of the county to avoid Henry's tactics of "take no prisoners." Henry was not quite that cruel, but his reputation for no nonsense dealing with criminals was legendary. He figured that kind of reputation would keep some of the "riffraff" out of Coleman County. I believe it did. Henry decided that he would run for the sheriff position in the spring. No one wanted to run against him.

### **Spring 1889**

Henry was elected the new Sheriff of Coleman County in March. He resigned permanently from the Texas Rangers, and he told me that he would no longer be calling me to serve as a chaplain for the Texas Rangers. He said that he had all the deputies he needed to safeguard the county. I wondered, "Does this mean there will be no more adventures for me? This should be good news, but I am sad to think that I will no longer take part in hunting down lawbreakers." Henry made it clear that this was a good move for us both because he would no longer have to constantly watch over me to keep me alive. "I am adding many years to your life by removing you from danger. You will live long enough to watch your children grow up, get married, and supply you with grandchildren." I could not argue with that. Henry was saving my life once again.

David, Jeremiah's son, is seeking to open a church in Coleman. I mentored David for years, and I talked to him about the advice that the Apostle Paul gave to Timothy, a young preacher beginning his career as a spiritual leader: *"Whoever aspires to be an overseer desires a noble task. Now the overseer is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him, and he must do so*

*in a manner worthy of full respect. If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?" (1 Timothy 3:1-5).*

Many preachers go into the ministry for all the wrong reasons: prestige, money, power, and pride. The Apostle Peter warns us about false religious leaders, *"But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves. Many will follow their depraved conduct and will bring the way of truth into disrepute. In their greed these teachers will exploit you with fabricated stories. Their condemnation has long been hanging over them, and their destruction has not been sleeping"* (2 Peter 2:1-3).

Spiritual leaders must adhere to God's demands for holy behavior. Jesus tells us, *"It would be better for them to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around their neck than to cause one of these little ones to stumble"* (Luke 17:2). The consequences for evil men who masquerade as spiritual leaders are harsh.

### **Summer 1889**

Paul, my brother Jimmy, and I have gone into business together to raise Quarter Horses. I will need a good business to support my family, especially when I decide to retire from the pulpit. My father taught me to ranch and to farm, so I am teaching Willie Sue (almost 8 years old) and Henry Augustus (5 years old) to do the same. They both love feeding the animals and sowing and reaping the garden. I tell the children that the Bible talks about reaping and sowing. The Apostle Paul tells us, *"The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully"* (2 Corinthians 9:6). James tells us, *"Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness"* (James 3:18). I stress to the children that God is telling us that how we behave toward one another matters to Him. Jesus tells us the bottom line to His teaching is to follow the "Golden Rule," *"So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets"* (Matthew 7:12).

The decision of what to do with my life is weighing heavily on my mind. I am nearly 40 years old, and I beat that average age of 30 when most circuit riders retire or



die. Two bullet holes and an arrowhead wound (shot in the left arm and left shoulder as well as an arrow wound in the left ankle) were war wounds that I had collected as a preacher. Any one of these wounds could have killed me. A limp and a hampered left shoulder will follow me for life. I see this as a small price to pay for following God's will. My life has settled. It is my hope that I will never have to pick up a gun against another human. My mouth will continue to be God's weapon against evil here in this world. But the guns will be put away until desperately needed. I now know that it is okay with God if I take care of just one little corner of the world. I do not have to save everyone or correct all the sins of the world, and that realization takes a lot of pressure off my mind and allows me to seek guidance from God as to my next step in life.

God did not let me down. He spoke loud and clear to me. One night in a dream I received a visit from Jeremiah. He told me that it is time that I settle down and focus more on my family. I believe that this was a message directly from the Holy Spirit. He appeared to me as Jeremiah so I would pay attention. A visit from an angel would have been more dramatic, but it was good to talk to Jeremiah. I will continue to serve in the pulpit for a few more years, and I will continue to build up my business of raising prize quarter horses.

I am grateful to God for a wonderful life, but sometimes I must wonder why I survive while some exceptionally good people do not. Even so, I know that I will see them again! I want everyone to know that I cannot help but believe in God. It is obvious that God is great and in charge just by looking at the majesty and the intricate workings of this world. God tells us that He loves us, and He wants the best life for us. All we must do is love Him, repent of our sins, and follow Him. The Bible is filled with His words of wisdom and His plan for our salvation. If we believe that Jesus took our sins upon himself and gave the needed sacrifice to return us to God's grace, we can live a life of joy and peace here on Earth as well as eternally in Heaven. I choose to walk in the light, and I will continue to tell this message to anyone I meet until the day God calls me home.

Someday I might explore the huge canyon and deserts out west and travel through Death Valley, the "hottest place on Earth." I have yet to scale the Rocky

Mountains and swim in the Great Salt Lake. Through my experiences as a circuit rider in Texas, I have gained much knowledge about surviving the perils the wilderness has to offer. So, perhaps one day I may head further west to take on some new adventures.

After all...

**What could possibly go wrong?**

Matt Stephen

May 2025