

Jedediah Webb - Circuit Rider

Chpt. 7

Sept. 1878

In early September, I arrived at Coleman and immediately sought out Angela. I wanted to find out if she was interested in pursuing a relationship with me. She informed me that she was and furthermore, we should plan to be married. With that, I dropped to my knees and formally asked her to be my wife. To no surprise she said, "Yes of course!" My next step was to ask her mother and sisters for their permission. They were all excited. I am not sure if they were more excited about me entering the family or getting the opportunity to plan a wedding. We decided that the best time to hold the wedding would be May of next year. This would give me time to begin establishing the new circuit this winter and early spring. We talked about our plans for building a house, continuing medical training for Angela, and my future as a circuit rider. It seems that most circuit riders are either dead or settled in one community by the time they hit 30 years old. So it was time for me to decide which it will be for me!

The building process for Angela's family's house was proceeding nicely. We were building it on the same site as their tent was set. It is constructed of clay brick and pine lumber. We decided on three small bedrooms, a kitchen, a living area, and lots of storage space. The girls had already picked out their room and found rugs and gingham cloth to put on the walls. The girls were sad to think that Angela would be moving out soon, but they were excited about each having their own room.

Part of my discussion with the community members of Coleman was to begin building a Methodist church and parsonage. It was agreed that both would be done. Coleman was known for its production of clay brick and clay tile, so the pine lumber would need to be ordered from the lumber mills in East Texas. In the meantime, there was a room available for me at Mrs. Flanagan's Boarding House. Several congregation members have offered to keep Rahab and Sadie for me until I can build a barn and corral for my own use. Angela agreed to keep Rustler until we moved into the

parsonage. I hope that I don't lose Rustler to Angela or her sisters. He seems to really like females. I could feel the Holy Spirit moving within this community. People are determined to have a Methodist presence in Coleman regardless of the cost. Everyone is willing to support not only the church in Coleman but the communities on the Brownwood/Buffalo Gap circuit who need help establishing the Methodist presence.

It was difficult to tear myself away from Coleman, but I needed to return to Dublin and get packed for the move. Back in Dublin, I told my family that Angela had accepted my proposal of marriage. Everyone was excited. Mother shed some tears, and my father said, "it's about time you started your family!" I could tell he was glad for me and sad at the same time. It was easy to pack up my few personal belongings for the move. What was hard was saying goodbye to my family and friends. I assured them that I would visit from time to time. I could not find Willie, and no one knew where he was. I figured I would run into him eventually. I still wanted to counsel him and bring him closer to God.

I packed up Rahab and Sadie, and I called on Rustler to begin the 60-mile trip to Coleman. I said "so long" to my two brothers, Jimmy and Billy as well as to my two sisters, Maggie and Susan, all in their teens and old enough to assist Mother and Father with the ranch until they decided to move on and start their own families. Maybe one day some of them will present me with some nephews and nieces. I know I plan to make them uncles and aunts! I told them to be sure to come to Coleman for visits as it's only a two-day ride.

Jeremiah Anderson, my best friend and spiritual brother, had decided earlier to relocate his family to Coleman. I was thrilled that he would be there with me. He already landed a job with the blacksmith there in Coleman, and he had talked to the community about establishing a church for people of color through the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME). He also wanted to look into riding the Brownwood/Buffalo Gap circuit that was just established. Jeremiah was considered by the AME to be a lay-preacher due to his lack of education, but they were working with him to get him credentialed as a certified pastor. Jeremiah's wife Rachel, sons Isaiah and David, and daughters Esther and Elizabeth were busy packing their possessions for the move. Jeremiah had already

selected a site for his sod brick and lumber house. I would help him build his house; in the meantime, a large tent would do to house Jeremiah's family.

After the War between the States, the government established the Freedman's Bureau which was designed to provide long-term protection for formerly enslaved Black people and promote peace and goodwill for them as they transition into a free society. I am sure that the Bureau did its best to help the Black population, but what it really comes down to is how the different communities act toward the formerly enslaved Black people. Some Anglo church congregations encourage Black people to join their churches, but many did not. The community of Coleman was an exception to many of the Texas frontier towns because they accepted people of all colors and nationalities in their churches. They were dedicated to supporting the efforts of Jeremiah in whatever he decided to do.

Paul, my Comanche friend, had already moved his family to the Coleman area. He established a homestead on Hords Creek which was once the home of the Lipan and Comanche tribes who have since been moved to reservations in Indian Territory. Paul constructed a sod brick home on some acreage granted him by the governmental experiment to enable Native American families to establish themselves outside of the reservations in order to acclimate them to "civilized" society. I sometimes wonder about our country's efforts to civilize Indians by acclimating them to the American way of life. It seems to me that sometimes the American way of life is far from civilized behavior – at least God's definition of civilized behavior.

Paul and his family live in a tipi of buffalo skin as their main residence. He continues to build structures from sod brick but mainly uses them as storage and shelter for his animals. He is dedicated to conserving many of the traditions of his culture, so he is still tempted to worship the gods in nature such as spirits in rivers, rocks, mountains, sky, wind and rain. I emphasized to Paul that God is a jealous God, and that he must not continue to serve other gods. God tells us, *"for you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God (Exodus 34:14).* I tell Paul and his family that God will have no other gods before him. This includes spirits and deities as well as wealth, status, power, or anything else in this world. God wants

our first allegiance directed toward Him. Paul has passionately studied the word of God with me, and he is so dedicated to his love for Jesus that he wants to act as an evangelist to lead other Native American families to Christ.

Paul took up farming and ranching. His wife, Angel, is well-versed in Native American medicinal practices, and she is serving as Angela's helper. Angela and Angel are able to teach each other the best of their cultural medicines, and the Coleman community is benefiting from this outstanding relationship between the two cultures. Paul's children, Tanis and Talako, spend their days in play - wrestling and playing Indian versions of football and field hockey. They also work at weaving, making clothing, baskets, and pottery. They instruct the local children all about these new ways to play and work. Talako, at 10 years of age, is able to outride and outshoot most teenagers and young men in the area. Tanis at 8 years of age is a true beauty, and she sings with the voice of an angel.

The Baptist Preacher's wife had already established a grade school for all children in the community regardless of color or cultural background. Paul eagerly enrolled his children as he did not want to send them to the schools on the reservations or the boarding schools back East. These boarding schools have the reputation of harshly treating Native American children in order to "civilize" them.

The town of Coleman, established in 1876, has made advancements for the safety of its people. Law and order have been established through the election of Bill Price as the Coleman County Sheriff, and the town has secured people to act as armed security for the community. The Texas Rangers have a presence in the area although the Governor of Texas has reduced the budget for the Texas Rangers by 25%. This has meant a drop in personnel for Texas Ranger Robert Maloney stationed in Buffalo Gap and Cow Town. As a result of budget cuts, Ranger Maloney is often called upon to travel to other areas to help keep the peace. This helps limit what he can do for the Coleman area.

Peace reigns in the immediate area of Coleman, but not to the north, south, or west. In other words, Coleman is on the brink of civilization, and the people are fighting hard to create a safe environment for families. Indian attacks are all but gone except for Lipan Apache raids out of Mexico and New Mexico. Recently the Apache Lipan Indians

under Chief Victorio have been raiding West Texas communities. Bandits have increased their activities west of the Brazos River. They are running free as there are many good hiding places for which to retreat when chased by the law. Bandits steal livestock and head into Mexico where the U.S. Army cannot follow. The Texas Rangers are putting a stop to that as they can follow them into Mexico – sometimes legally, sometimes illegally – and put a stop to their thieving and sometimes their lives.

Speaking of killing...I cannot get out of my mind that I have killed a person. I killed Blake in self-defense and defense of Jeremiah, but I took away Blake's chance to redirect his life to goodness rather than evil. Will God forgive him? Will God forgive me? How can I be a spiritual leader now that I have killed someone? As I contemplate these questions, I hear the Holy Spirit loud and clear say to me, "Focus on your assignment to this new circuit. Go to the wilderness and minister to the least, the last, and the lost - those who are hungry, unsheltered, abused, and ignored. Jesus told you to serve others as you would serve Him, *'And the King will answer and say to them, Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it (clothed, sheltered, fed, etc.) to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me'*" (Matthew 25:40). This is what I needed to hear - bring love to the people. Help those who have never experienced love to learn how it feels. At first they won't accept it, but they will learn to crave it and to give it to others. This is how you crack that hard heart that so many people have developed from living in this imperfect world. And I know that there are a lot of hard hearts on the Texas Frontier. With that message, I took attention away from myself and directed it toward people who need God's love.

It is now October, and it is time to load up Rahab and Sadie to make my first trip on the new circuit. Of course, my protector, Rustler, will accompany us as well. Cow Town, Buffalo Gap, Coleman, Brownwood, Copperas Creek, and Turkey Creek are all about a day's travel from one another - about 180 miles total - so stops in between are not as necessary as with the Dublin Circuit. The primary purpose of the first run is to introduce myself to each major community and determine service sites and lay people who will work to establish the Methodist Church in the area. I had already made several

contacts in each of the major communities, so they were assigned to arrange a time and place for me to deliver an introductory sermon to interested people.

I have been taught to preach with “Holy Knock ‘Em Down Power.” This is to preach with fire from the heart without excessive reading of notes. We circuit riders usually preach what John Wesley referred to as a “vital and practical religion.” The people want to hear what will help them now in their individual lives. They like to hear personal stories from everyday life. They want to hear something that they can take home with them today that will help them get closer to God. Bishop Francis Asbury urged his circuit riding preachers to “Feel for the power; feel for the power, brother.” All circuit riders were challenged to pound home the message that personal salvation is achieved by faith in Christ and good works.

In honoring the “Holy Knock ‘Em Down Power” sermon, I decided that the first sermon I would give to my new communities would be titled: **“Heaven or Hell...Which place are you making a reservation?”** I believe it is important to let everyone know where I stand on salvation. Now is the time for them to hear about eternal life. It is time that they understood that their time on Earth is only the beginning of their existence. They are living in tough times, and they are not assured of long life here on Earth, so it is imperative that they decide immediately about their salvation. It is time that they learn that they – and only they - determine where they will spend their eternity.

So at each stop, I climbed up to the pulpit, took a swig of cool water, and began, “Brothers and Sisters, there is a Heaven and a Hell. Heaven and Hell are real, and they both exist for eternity. There is a consequence for how you live your lives here on Earth. Jesus, himself, tells us so. In a parable about the End-of-Times, Jesus describes the children of God as wheat and the children of evil as weeds, *“As the weeds are collected and burned in the fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will weed out of His kingdom every cause of sin and all who practice lawlessness. And they will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father”* (Matthew 13:40-43). Jesus leaves no doubt in our minds that the

unbelievers will face a self-induced eternal punishment while the righteous will glory in the presence of God forever.

Jesus goes on to tell us that now is the time to correct our behavior, *"If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than to have two hands and two feet and be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell"*

(Matthew 18:8-9).

When asked about what happens to the nations at the End-of-Times, Jesus tells us that He will divide us into two groups: sheep on His right and goats on His left, *"Then He will say to those on His left, 'Depart from Me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry, and you gave Me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave Me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, I was naked and you did not clothe Me, I was sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.' And they too will reply, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?' Then the King will answer, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for Me.' And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life"* **(Matthew 25:41-46).**

Brothers and Sisters...you pick...your choices are Heaven or Hell. There is no third choice. Which will it be? Do not fool yourselves into thinking that everyone goes to Heaven. There is a choice to be made and many choose the wrong path. Jesus tells us, *"You can enter God's Kingdom only through the narrow gate. The highway to hell is broad, and its gate is wide for the many who choose that way"* **(Matthew 7:13).** Brothers and Sisters, we want to be placed at the right hand of Jesus at the time of judgment. Don't choose the path that leads you to suffering for an eternity. Choose to follow Jesus and hold the love of God in your heart now and forever. Amen."

My first stop was at Brownwood where the people still consider me to be somewhat of a hero since I was with the group that tracked down and liberated the children who were carried off by the slave traders. I tried to ignore that praise, but they

showered me with gifts of food, clothing, and trail supplies as if I were some kind of celebrity. We held service in the Baptist Church, and we had a good attendance of at least 50 adults and a number of children. To my good pleasure, Susan Hamilton and her husband, Carl, both agreed to serve as lay leaders for the church. I am not sure what the conference thinks of women serving as lay leaders, but I believe women are just as capable of Christian leadership as men. I will gladly debate that point with any of my bosses.

The second stop was Copperas Creek where I earlier attended to the tragedy of Johnathan Walters and his family from the recent Indian attack. Thankfully, there have been no further attacks since then. The community has pulled together and is determined to protect themselves. We determined that the best place to hold church services would be at the barn of Jessie Goodlow. Jessie agreed to be the lay leader for the newly formed Methodist church community. That first service we had over 25 adults in attendance. A good show for such a small community.

My third stop was at Turkey Creek. We had over 40 people in attendance - a good show for a community as small as it is. We held a service in a large tent used for community activities. These wonderful people are fierce fighters, and they have adjusted to living in a very isolated and dangerous area of Texas. As a whole, they are dedicated to the love of God and want to get this Methodist church started. The women in the community are still offering their daughters to me, so I told them that I am engaged and will be married in the Spring. They were not necessarily happy to hear this, but they were glad to be added to the preaching circuit. Jason Greenwood, a leader in the community, agreed to be the lay leader for the Methodist church.

The fourth stop was Buffalo Gap. Normally, the next stop would be Cow Town, but I decided to go to Buffalo Gap first and solicit the help from Ranger Robert Maloney before I headed to Cow Town since Cow Town has a reputation for perversity and danger. At Buffalo Gap, we had a great attendance of people - over 80 adults and some children. Buffalo Gap is the County seat for Taylor County, and it is filled with people who are determined to develop this town into a vibrant place for families to live. We met

service in the community building on the square, and three of the congregation members stepped up to share lay leadership of the church.

My Fifth stop was Cow Town. This place is still a tent community except for a few crude buildings which serve as saloons and bordellos. I looked up Doc, the owner of the hotel and restaurant, to talk with him about holding a service. He introduced me to Sheriff Ray Crawford of Taylor County. I asked him questions about the town, and he filled me in on how the place was progressing. There has been extensive talk about naming this town "Abilene" after the final destination of the cattle trail to Abilene, Kansas. The town continues to build legitimate businesses and the railroad is scheduled to be built through the town next year. The town has gone through several town marshals – most are located on Boot Hill. He introduced me to Jack MacMillan, the newest marshal in town. Together we prayed over Jack that he would be successful in taming the town to the best of his ability.

I had heard that there is little respect for Christianity in Cow Town, but I was not prepared for what happened. As I was walking along the sidewalk past a saloon, my Bible was suddenly shot out from under my left hand. My Bible went soaring into the air and my hand was slightly grazed by the bullet. I looked up the street and saw a group of intoxicated men who were laughing and congratulating one of their comrades for being such a good shot. I was shocked, frightened, and angry all at the same time. I was not carrying a gun of any kind...which is good. I try not to react before thinking things through, and this time I might have fired my gun before thinking of the consequences.

I have a tremendous sense of righteousness. I believe that people should pay for the evil that they do. It was hard for me not to fight back, but the Holy Spirit reminded me of God's will, *"Vengeance is Mine, and recompense; Their foot shall slip in due time; For the day of their calamity is at hand, And the things to come hasten upon them"* (**Deuteronomy 32:35**). I also have trouble "turning the other cheek" as Jesus pointed out in His *Sermon on the Mount*. Turning the other cheek does not mean that Jesus would now want me to hold my Bible in my right hand, hold it out, and wait for a second shot. By turning the other cheek, Jesus meant that we should not sink to the same level

as those who do evil. This means if I had a gun, I would leave it holstered. I am working on the concept of turning the other cheek. I have a way to go on that one if I genuinely want to be a spiritual leader for my flocks.

The Holy Spirit also reminded me that Jesus tells us that some people enjoy walking the dark path and are not ready to change, so we must be patient and pray for their salvation, *"Do not give what is holy to the dogs; nor cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you in pieces. (Matthew 7:6-7).* This is difficult for preachers. We want to immediately convert everyone we meet. I continually pray for the ability to discern when people are ready to hear of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit and when to leave people alone until they are ready.

I wrapped my hand with a handkerchief and called out to the men to be more aware of their actions that can harm others. Sheriff Crawford and Marshal MacMillan were more than happy to throw the group into the lockup to let them sober up and pay a good fine to be released. Let's say that they did not lead them gently to their cells. I let it go at that; however, I am sure that Abilene is going to push me to my limit of patience in come cases.

Back in Buffalo Gap, I thanked Ranger Maloney for his support and protection, and packed up to head to Brownwood. Rustler had been so well-behaved on this trip. I did not hear him growl or howl even once. He always enjoys meeting new people – especially the children. It seems that he spent half of this trip on his back getting belly rubs. However, while travelling he is wary and ready to fight to protect his family. On the trail to Brownwood, we came across a black bear and two of her cubs. We were all surprised at the suddenness of the encounter. The mother bear charged at us, and Rustler attacked her from the side. He was snarling a warning to her when I fired a charge from my scattergun into the air. I did not want to kill either Rustler or the bear, but I was prepared to use my rifle to end her life to save Rustler. In the meantime, the terrified cubs hightailed it into the brush and the mother decided to follow them. It all happened in a matter of seconds, but I spent the next few hours shaking. I could not steady my breathing or hands for the longest time.

Back in Coleman, I settled in to work on the house for Angela's family as well as Jeremiah's house. I also pitched in to work on the foundations for the Methodist Church and the Parsonage. Thanksgiving rolled around before I knew it, and afterwards it was time to hit the trail of the new circuit until Christmas. For this trip leading up to Christmas, Jeremiah plans to go with me, and we will stop at all the larger communities as well as some homesteads between the major towns and get to know the people in the countryside. It is common when one is a stranger to approach a homestead slowly and calmly holler out, "Hello to the house!" That is the friendly way to approach an unknown site, but it is always good to know exactly where your rifle or pistol is just in case.

Matt Stephen

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