

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“We decided the night before you left that we didn’t want you to die with us. We knew the Lord still had things for you to do. Very few of us knew what it was like to be free in Christ before you came along and those who did had long since forgotten. We figured we faced prison and torture, even death, but we were ready for that. Things didn’t quite happen as we thought, but it wouldn’t have made any difference if we had known.

“We knew from Leo, who had called the police to begin with, when the sheriff’s men were supposed to come. He was supposed to point out the ringleaders, especially you. We wanted to be sure you left before the police came. As it turned out, we were almost too late.

“A few minutes after you disappeared into the woods we heard the cars coming. Some of us decided to run into the trees, but they were ready for that. Before the cars ever got there they had put men with guns all around the town. It’s a wonder you ever got through.

“I was running with the Bakers. The first volley hit Jack and he went down. Carol turned back to help him and got shot in the back. I saw the shots came from in front of us, so I started to change directions. Just as I did, they shot at me; I found out later the shot had grazed my head. That was the last I remember until the next morning. I woke up with a throbbing headache, and when I tried to open my eyes it hurt so much I closed them again.

“I heard someone groaning close by. I managed to open my eyes just enough to squint in the direction of the sound. It was Jack Baker. So far as I knew, we were the only ones still alive. I couldn’t bring myself to go help him; every time I tried to get up the pain was so intense I almost passed out.

“It seemed like I lay there for a long time before anything else happened. I just prayed someone would come along and help us. For all I knew, Jack could be bleeding to death. I heard footsteps finally and thought someone had come to finish us off. I was glad to hear a familiar voice. It was Bertie, speaking to Jack.

“ ‘Jack, can you hear me? Where does it hurt? Oh – looks like a bullet went clean through your shoulder. You’ve lost a lot of blood from the look of you, but it’s stopped now, thank God. I’ll have to get you somewhere to clean you up and put some kind of bandage on you. Not much left after they burned the place down.’

“That was the first I knew about the fire. Now that she mentioned it, I could smell the wood smoke, real strong like. I was too worried about other things before to notice.

“Bertie?”

“ ‘Myrtle, is that you? You’ve got so much blood on your head I thought sure you were dead! Maybe that’s what saved you. Let me go get Ham; I can’t handle both of you by myself. ’”

“I opened my eyes enough to see her walk away. The pain wasn’t so great now, but it still hurt to turn my head to look around. I looked in the direction of town and there was no more town. Everything was burnt and black and there was smoke everywhere.

“Bertie came back with Ham a few minutes later. He had a bandage, made out of an undershirt, around his right leg and another around his chest. It was a miracle he was even alive. One bullet lodged on one of his ribs and the other grazed his leg. It was hard for him to walk; he was using a stick for a cane.

“I told them we needed water and they found some somewhere. They dug out an old pot from the ashes and used it for a container. I told them to tend to Jack first, so they managed to get him to swallow a little water. They cleaned his wound as best they could and bound it up with a strip Bertie tore from the hem of her dress.

“By the time they got to me I was dying of thirst. My mouth was so dry and swollen I could hardly swallow, much less speak. That water was the best thing I ever tasted, rust and all, but I couldn’t get too much down.

“Some time later, Jack regained consciousness and they gave him a little more water. The first thing he asked about was Carol. Bertie shook her head. ‘She didn’t make it, Jack. She’s with the Lord now.’

“Jack cried like a baby and the rest of us all cried, too. It was just too much; everything and almost everyone we cared about had been destroyed. Our whole lives had gone up in smoke. The Lord must have had pity on us, because we all felt comforted. Even Jack stopped crying.

“Ham helped me sit up and he and Bertie filled us in on the rest of what happened. Bertie hadn’t been shot at all; she stumbled and fell and someone fell on top of her. Whoever it was bled so much that the men who came around to check thought she was dead, too.

“Ham got shot twice, like I said. At the end, after they had shot everybody and set the town on fire, the police came around and shot again at anyone they saw moving or anyone they thought might still be alive. Ham heard them shoot several times, but when he heard someone walk up to him, they stopped but didn’t shoot. He opened his eyes and saw the deputy we captured. Ham had been taking care of him and talking to him. The deputy just turned around and walked away.

“We thought the men who came were sheriff’s deputies, and some of them were. Most of them, though, Ham said, were Security Police, not just deputies with Security Police patches. They looked like professionals and some of them had strange accents. We couldn’t figure out why they would be so concerned with a little bunch like us out in the middle of nowhere. It just didn’t make sense.

“Bertie had family not too far from Bentown, so we decided to try to get there. We spent the night where we were, because neither Jack nor I was able to travel. The next morning, Ham made canes for Jack and me, and he helped Jack while Bertie tried to help me. We were a sight as we all limped along; it took forever just to make it into the woods. The hill we climbed was almost more than we could handle; we had to stop every few yards to rest.

“It took us two days to make it to Bertie’s niece. She was too afraid to keep us, but she gave us food and clean clothes before she sent us on our way. We slept that night by a campfire, because it was a little cold. Eventually we found a cave and we stayed there until our food started running low. Ham killed a couple of rabbits for us, but we knew we couldn’t stay there long.

“Jack was convinced he had to come to Kentucky. He said you had gone into West Virginia to minister and he believed the Lord wanted him to take your place in Kentucky. He remembered what you said about Marvin Reynolds and decided we should go there to ask him for help. Besides, he said, he used to have family there. We were stronger by then, but still weak. It took us a long time to make it down to the Big Sandy River and back up the other bank into Kentucky.

“The strangest thing happened to us when we crossed the river. This man we had never seen before met us and told us we should follow him. He was the sort you just trusted, so we went with him. He led us to this beautiful little valley that was like paradise to us. Some good Christian people looked after us there.”

“Would they include Martin and Marcia Henry and Brother Phillip?” George interrupts.

“Why, yes, did you go there, too? They were some of the godliest people we ever met. They nursed us back to health and sent us on our way. Ham and Bertie stayed, so you probably saw them.

“No, I don’t think so. I don’t remember if I did.”

“Well, they must have left later. Anyway, Jack and I crossed the mountains and eventually found Brother Marvin. He and some other people were staying at this farm up some creek or another. Marvin was so nice to us and so thrilled to hear about you. One night we were sitting around talking and he all of a sudden felt the strongest need to pray for you. He thought you were in very great danger.”

“Was that back in December?”

“Why, yes, it was. What happened?”

“I was nearly beaten to death, but the Lord saved me. I’ll tell you about it later. Go on.”

“Okay. Jack and I stayed there at the farm, which belonged to this man that was a sheriff, for a couple of months. A few weeks ago Jack left, headed in the direction of Salyersville. I decided I was too much of a burden to the people there on the farm, they were so crowded, so I took out by myself. They tried to talk me out of it, but I wouldn’t listen. I wound up here with Brother Harvey, as afraid as the rest of them.”

After her long speech she sits silently. George gets out of the bed, goes to where she is standing and gives her a hug. They all join in. After that, there is a time of happier sharing, a time of laughter and good feelings. Harvey finds food for George, who discovers he is quite hungry and thirsty. As he eats, he tells some of his own story. Some of it is familiar to Myrtle and she nods and smiles from time to time, but much of it none of them have heard.

“So this morning the Lord told me to go down into the campground. I sure didn’t want to, but I’ve learned to trust Him, even when what He tells me to do makes no sense to me. I see now that it was for your sakes. He told me He had some people here He needed to reach, but I didn’t know it was you, of course. He always sees things clearly, even when we don’t.”

They join in a chorus of amen’s. I wonder at the cloud they travel in, when the Lord’s will is always so clear to me. I know that’s the consequence of sin, and I know the One who brought sin into the world.

George does not spend much time with these brethren. The afternoon of the next day he tells Brother Harvey he feels the need to get back to his home church. He believes his work is almost finished, short as it has been. The Lord has used him to start and revive churches throughout much of southwestern West Virginia and others are ready now to carry on the work he started.

“I don’t know why the Lord has seen fit to send me back to die with my own church, but I can’t think of a better place to go to meet Him. You all must remain strong in your faith and not live in fear any more. There aren’t many people left out here who haven’t already run off to the towns, but minister to those who are left. Stay faithful to the Lord, for He is always faithful to you.”

They exchange hugs, tears and good-byes, and George resumes his journey home. The way back is easier for him than the trip out because he is stronger now, spiritually and physically. The forest has become even more parched and dry than when we first traveled through it, but the Lord continues to provide George’s needs. Many of the places that were inhabited before are all but deserted now.

George takes a detour around the town when he arrives, because the church is no longer there. Several times we see cars from a distance with the Security Police emblem, but they don’t see George, who stays well

concealed.

Salt Lick Creek is several miles southeast of town and on the opposite side of the river. George fords the river at a deserted point at night, wading through the remaining stream of water without difficulty. The middle of the next morning he arrives at Max Trundle's farm.

The first person he sees as he walks across the fields toward the house is Bob McCrattick. Bob sees him at almost the same time and lets out a war whoop. He comes racing to George and catches him up in a bear hug.

"Can't – breathe – Bob."

"Oh, sorry, George, but I'm just so *happy* to see you again! Until Jack and Myrtle came by, we didn't know for sure if you were dead or alive. Also didn't know if we'd ever see you again this side of glory. I see your face has changed since we last saw you."

"The beard? Well, there aren't many razor blades out in the middle of the wilderness. How is everyone?"

"Super, just super. The Lord has really watched over us out here. Max and I loaded them up and brought them here just a couple of days after you sent me back. Since then, the Lord has provided for our every need. We've had to chase some thugs away a few times, like Jake Stein's gang, but so far the Security Police have left us alone."

"Let's go on up to the house, then. I'm eager to see everybody after so many months. Seems like I've been gone for years, so much has happened."

"Come on with me. We know part of your story, up to the time you left Bentown, but I'm sure a lot has happened since then."

"Hey, Max! Look who just drug in!"

Max comes to meet them at a much more leisurely pace than Bob used. His somber face does crack into a smile, though, and he greets George with an iron handshake. George winces.

"First Bob tries to break my ribs then you crush every bone in my hand! How are you, Brother?"

"Resting in the Lord. I haven't enjoyed life this much in years, since my boys left home. Marvin said we should expect you soon, but I don't think we really believed him. They're just sitting around the house gabbing, like old folks do. Come on in."

There is a great rush of excitement and activity when George enters the house. About twenty people gather around him, all speaking at once. All of them want to hug him, to greet him, to ask how he's doing. Marvin finally brings order out of the chaos; Bob and Max just stand to one side, arms folded, grinning.

"Let the man breathe! One at a time, brethren. Let's all gather as we do when we have services and give him a chance to tell his story – but not now. He's probably tired and hungry. Martha, take him into the kitchen and find him something to eat, if this crowd has left anything. After that, let him rest in our bed, if he wants to, *then* we'll hear what he has to say."

With some reluctance the people break away from George and allow Martha to take his arm and lead him into the big kitchen. Some of them file after him, not willing to lose sight, but they keep a respectful distance away while he sits down at the table. Martha bustles about in her business-like way and prepares him some food.

He declines the offer to rest after breakfast and returns to the living room, which also serves as a meeting room. The church gathers eagerly to hear what he has to say. Over the next hour he fills in the gaps about where he has been and what he has done for the past six months. The people often interrupt with shouts of praise; at other times they cry together. The story of Julie, particularly, touches them. When he finishes his story and asks if they have any questions, Marvin has to restore order once more. Their curiosity is boundless; for the past months their knowledge and understanding of the world has been limited to what they could see and hear around them.

At the end someone asks a question which puts an end to the air of celebration and joy for a while. "George, where do you think we're going from here? What's going to happen to us all."

His face takes on a troubled cast. "The Lord has made it clear to me that I have returned here to die, in this flesh at least. We're in the early years of the time of the great Tribulation, brethren. The Antichrist is already come. When the Lord's angel blows the seventh trumpet, Satan will have his final hour and the Beast will try to take control of the whole world. I've heard that in some places they're already making people wear a mark before they can buy anything or do business.

"One of the things the Antichrist will do is try to remove the church, because we stand between him and absolute power. What we've seen up to now is only the beginning. There will be a systematic and officially sanctioned effort to destroy every church and to kill every Christian who refuses to deny Christ. That has already started; I think the church at Bentown was like a trial run.

"The reason the Security Police haven't bothered you yet is that they aren't ready. They have to have enough manpower to track down and arrest, or kill, all of the Christians in this area. There are probably other groups around like ours, hiding out.

"This is a hard thing to say, but I'm sure Marvin has told you much of it already. All of you have to ask yourselves, as I do, if you're ready to endure the most hideous torture for Christ's sake. It is coming, brethren, believe me, and very soon."

Some of the women are already crying in fear, and the faces of the men have turned ashen. Marvin steps up beside George and puts his arm around the other man's shoulders.

"What George says is the Lord's own truth. We've shared these thoughts before, but we've grown complacent. These aren't pleasant thoughts, but we have to think them. I want us all to share a prayer time together here and then go into our own prayer closets to seek the Lord. We must be at peace with Him and with ourselves if we are to come through the times ahead with our faith still strong."

Solemnly, with an air of sadness, despair and fear, they bow their heads. As they pray, though, the Lord encourages them and strengthens them and they rise with a new sense of determination and trust. Knowing their time is short, they separate to make their peace with God, each in his or her own way.