



Surrounded!
**“ROUGH AND READY PREACHER:
PETER CARTWRIGHT”**

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Birmingham, Michigan
Scripture: Luke 9:23-27

Then he said to them all, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words, of them the Son of Man will be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. But truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God.”

Let me say as we begin: preachers have it good today. In every one of our preaching stations we have a building. It may not be a converted professional basketball arena such as down in Houston, nor a Norman Gothic cathedral, but there’s always a roof, heat in the winter and sometimes cool air in the summer and rooms for classes to teach adults and youth wherever we are sent.

Not only that, but we Methodists are no longer on the move all the time. We are still “itinerant” ministers, meaning that we’ve committed ourselves to being sent where we are most needed by those who have the larger needs of the church at heart. In the not-distant past, six years was about the most one could hope to stay at a church. There was a time preachers would go to Annual Conference with possessions packed and there they’d learn where they were going that year. Even earlier, in the first years of America, preachers had circuits of 25 churches or were sent out into the wilderness to find people.

We have it very good. We have housing wherever we go. Churches provide it. We call them parsonages. Even the smallest churches come so equipped. In the formative years of our tradition, preachers depended upon the kindness of strangers to house them, sharing rooms with 10 others in flea-ridden beds, often sleeping in the open or in whatever shelter they could find.

And preachers today have salaries. They’re paid more often than not. A number of retired preachers could tell you about the benefits of our pension system. How different from the day when, to supplement a meager salary, a church would “give the preacher a good pounding.” Have you ever heard that phrase? A “pounding” sounds brutal. What it meant was that everyone in the church was to give the preacher a pound of something to live on: a pound of chicken, of

beef, of butter, of flour, of sugar, of fruit, in order to help them carry on. The Christian witness we will examine today, circuit rider Peter Cartwright, had an annual salary of between 30 and 100 dollars, which was paid in full only three times. Some preachers of Cartwright's acquaintance actually came to the point of starvation.

Above all, we're safe. My parsonage has never been set on fire by angry parishioners, as happened to John Wesley's father. I'm not saying that you've never had that impulse in your hearts, but you've never acted on it, which I greatly appreciate. What I'm telling you, of course, is that we live in a much different world today, free of the hardships and dangers of America's early years. Those frontier times called for a different type of resolve and different methods than what we use today.

I've never been attacked for presenting the good news of Jesus Christ. Yet often, when Peter Cartwright entered a town, the reception was hostile. And the right to preach the gospel was earned only by his own physical prowess. One tavern owner in a small frontier town boasted that any preacher who rode into his town would never ride a horse again.

“I decided to visit this tavern owner. And news of my coming spread like wildfire. People were warning me of the tavern owner's threat, but I kept riding!”

Cartwright entered the town, and immediately confronted the tavern owner. A terrible fight ensued. Cartwright soon had the tavern owner on the ground and was pounding him in rhythm as he sang:

(Fists swinging in time): “All hail the power of Jesus name! Let sinners prostrate fall!”

He made the tavern owner promise never again to interfere with a preacher, but it took him three verses to do it. That man later became a member of the church. Tavern owners seemed to have it in for Cartwright. Another one violently attacked him only to find himself flat on his back with Cartwright's fist in his face saying:

“Don't you feel the Spirit of the Lord striving with you, brother?”

Yes, preaching then was a hazardous profession. Cartwright was at a camp meeting in Ohio where the attendance consisted partly of “rabble and rowdies,” drunk and armed with clubs, knives and horse whips. While in the middle of his sermon on Sunday night, two of these rowdies tried to break up the service. The magistrate present refused to preserve order, so Cartwright challenged the two and their many confederates. A brawl ensued. Finally, Peter Cartwright bested one of the leaders, and the troublemakers were arrested and fined.

That's why Peter Cartwright has been called God's “Rough and Ready Preacher.” He was of medium height, with a square, two-hundred pound frame and great physical strength. He was quoted as saying he had a constitution that could wear out a dozen threshing machines and he said of himself:

“I am one of the Lord’s breaking plows!”

A breaking plow was the type used to break up the hard ground which had never before been plowed.

That was what Peter Cartwright did — he broke new ground for Christ and the church, going into territory which had never been plowed before, preparing it for abundant growth which would follow. He preferred to use debate, which he loved and at which he excelled. He preferred to use moral persuasion, but it was a rough time and his was a muscular, frontier Christianity which was forced to battle for survival. Circuit Riders had to fight as well as preach.

We can hardly do justice to Peter Cartwright in these brief minutes. At best I can evoke a sense of this distant time, and whet your appetite to learn more about this remarkable man. His autobiography is one of the most fascinating ones you will ever read. Cartwright was born in 1785 when our country was still untamed. As a child, his parents moved to Kentucky as part of a large caravan gathered together for protection from the native tribes. It was a prudent decision, as seven families who lagged behind the caravan were massacred.

The Cartwrights settled near Logan, Kentucky. Methodist preachers had just started to ride circuits in that area and one received permission to preach in the Cartwright’s cabin when he was in the region. A Methodist Conference was soon established, known as the Western Conference, the seventh one established. In 1801 a camp-meeting was held at Cane Ridge, at which nearly 2,000 persons were converted. Peter was then a wild boy of sixteen, fond of horse-racing, card-playing and dancing. The Methodist preaching soon awakened him to a sense of dissatisfaction with his life. He wrote:

“In 1801, when I was in my sixteenth year, my father, my eldest half-brother, and myself, attended a wedding about five miles from home, where there was a great deal of drinking and dancing, which was very common at marriages those days. I drank little or nothing; my delight was in dancing! After a late hour in the night, we mounted our horses and started for home. I was riding my race-horse.”

But something was to happen within young Cartwright, the likes of which he never expected would happen to him. In his autobiography, he wrote:

“A few minutes after we had put up the horses, and were sitting by the fire, I began to reflect on the manner in which I had spent the day and evening and felt guilty and condemned. I rose and walked the floor. All of a sudden, my blood rushed to my head, my heart palpitated, in a few minutes I turned blind; an awful impression rested on my mind that death had come and I was unprepared to die! I fell on my knees and began to ask God to have mercy on me.”

For three months Cartwright agonized over the state of his soul. Finally, he was drawn to a Camp Meeting. A Presbyterian minister had begun holding sacramental meetings and invited the Methodist preachers to attend, including John Page, a popular Methodist preacher. So many people flocked to hear Page that the church could not hold a tenth of the congregation. The

people erected a stand in a nearby shady grove and prepared seats for a large congregation. People crowded to this meeting from far and near. They came in large wagons, with food already prepared. The women slept in the wagons, and the men under them.

Bishop Asbury considered Camp Meetings to be one of God's great fishing nets in which human souls might be caught, remembering how Jesus said to Peter, "I will make you fishers of people!" Cartwright attended this Shady Grove Camp Meeting and said:

(Cartwright): "An impression was made on my mind, as though a voice said to me, 'Thy sins are all forgiven thee.' Divine light flashed all round me, unspeakable joy sprung up in my soul! I rose to my feet, opened my eyes, and it really seemed as if I was in heaven; the trees, the leaves on them, and everything seemed, and I really thought were, praising God!"

Cartwright soon sold his favorite race-horse, burned his cards, and gave up his beloved gambling. He began to preach as a "local," and in 1806 he was ordained an elder by Bishop Francis Asbury himself. He rode circuits in Kentucky, Tennessee, Indiana, Ohio and Illinois, where preaching stations could be hundreds of miles apart. He became known for his fearless outspokenness and became a legendary folk character in his life.

From early on, Cartwright was uncompromising in his hatred of slavery. He moved his family to Illinois to "get clear of the evil of slavery" and so his children would not marry into slave-owning families. He rejoiced when the Methodist Episcopal church divided into North and South over the issue of slavery in 1844 because it meant that the church was taking the issue seriously. He believed faith should be lived out in public life and actually won and served two terms in the Illinois legislature.

In 1832, in his first campaign, he defeated a rail splitter and surveyor recently returned from the Black Hawk War. The name of the man he defeated was Abraham Lincoln. It was "The only time," Lincoln wrote, "I ever have been beaten by the people." Later, Cartwright was the Democratic candidate for Congress in 1846, in opposition to Abraham Lincoln. At issue in that race was Lincoln's faith. Abe never joined a church and rumors circulated about his skepticism about Christianity. Lincoln actually had to publish posters which declared that he had never discredited the scriptures.

In that campaign, Lincoln attended a revival meeting Peter Cartwright was holding. During the invitation to accept Christ at the conclusion of the service, Cartwright took advantage of the situation and shouted at Lincoln from the pulpit:

"If you are not going to repent and go to Heaven, Mr. Lincoln, where are you going?"

Lincoln replied that he was, in fact, going to *Congress*. And Cartwright allowed that Congress was, indeed, some distance from heaven. Abe won that election by 1,500 votes. Nevertheless, Cartwright always felt that Lincoln was too much the politician and not forthright about his opposition to slavery.

Clearly, Cartwright was a lightning rod wherever he went. At the meeting of the Tennessee Conference in 1818, the clergyman in charge of the preaching assignments, Mr. Mac, was a popularity-seeker and afraid of giving Cartwright an opportunity to preach. So a Presbyterian invited Peter to use his pulpit, but Cartwright warned him that he would expose the errors of Calvinism and would not be intimidated out of it, so he was appointed to preach at a Methodist church. Cartwright wrote:

“Monday evening came; the church was filled to overflowing; every seat was crowded, and many had to stand. After singing and prayer, brother Mac took his seat in the pulpit. I then read my text: “What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?” At that moment I saw General Andrew Jackson walking up the aisle; he came to the middle post, and very gracefully leaned against it, and stood, as there were no vacant seats. Just then I felt someone pull my coat in the stand, and turning my head, my refined city-preacher whispering a little loud, said: “General Jackson has come in; General Jackson has come in!” I felt a flash of indignation run all over me like an electric shock, and facing about to my congregation, and purposely speaking out audibly, I said, “Who is General Jackson? If he don’t get his soul converted, God will damn him as quick as he would a guinea stealing thief!”

The congregation, General Jackson and all smiled or laughed right out, all at the preacher’s expense – and Cartwright ducked his head down low. When the congregation was dismissed, Mr. Mac, the city-stationed preacher, stepped up to him and very sternly said: “You are the strangest man I ever saw, and General Jackson will chastise you for your insolence before you leave the city!”

“Very clear of it,” said I, “for General Jackson, I have no doubt, will applaud my course; and if he should undertake to chastise me, ‘There is two as can play at that game!’” General Jackson was staying at one of the Nashville hotels. Next morning, very early, my city preacher went down to the hotel to make an apology to General Jackson for my conduct in the pulpit the night before. Shortly after Mac had left I passed by the hotel, and I met the General on the pavement; and before I approached him by several steps he smiled and reached out his hand and said...”

“Mr. Cartwright, you are a man after my own heart. I am very much surprised at Mr. Mac, to think that I would be offended at you. No, sir; I told him that I highly approved of your independence; that a minister of Jesus Christ ought to love everybody and fear no mortal man. I told Mr. Mac that if I had a few thousand such independent, fearless officers as you were, and a well-drilled army, I could take old England!”

Yes, times were different then. The prime of Cartwright’s career is now almost 200 years past. Over his career he baptized more than 12,000 people. Most Methodists have never heard of him, but from such tough stock this church was built. Still, his life poses relevant questions for all of

us, I think — and I'm glad he's not here to pound the answers into us. As I cannot tell you more of the amazing anecdotes of his life, and as I'm not going to give an altar-call at the close of my sermon, I'm going to ask you some questions this morning. Let the prayerful answers you give at the altar of your heart be your response to the Gospel this morning.

First, will you be more energetic in expressing your faith? Cartwright was unafraid to speak boldly to those who needed it. He took on two future Presidents, and was unafraid to chastise the entire house of Methodist Bishops, which he did more than once. You've heard of his physical exploits, but most of his achievements came in theological battles. Will you ask yourself, "Why am I not more industrious and adventuresome in presenting my faith? Should I not love everybody and fear no woman or man?"

Second, will you, like Cartwright, be bold in opposing evil? Slavery was the great evil of Cartwright's time, and he hated it and fought it. Now, slavery is officially abolished in the U.S., yet new forms of slavery are rampant in our world. Human trafficking takes place in many forms not far from us at all. Racism is the unfinished work of our church and nation. Poverty and hunger could be eliminated had we the political will. Will you think through your faith, resist evil in whatever forms it presents itself, and work for the up-building of God's Kingdom?

Third, when he was asked why he put up with so many trials, Cartwright said:

"I cannot leave one sheep behind. The Lord won't allow it and so neither will I!"

Cartwright could not endure even one person not knowing of God's love. Is there not one person you know in your life who would remain a stranger to God's love and mercy if you were not to do something? Think on how you might reach them.

Finally, would you be willing to undertake any hardship in order to witness to the love and grace of God? For the sake of Christ, the early Methodists endured great dangers, if not from Native American tribes, or Tavern Keepers, or Highwaymen, then from the Baptists — I've omitted those gruesome stories. The bottom line, however, was that the early Methodists counted hardships as nothing compared with the glory of sharing God's love in Jesus Christ. Is there not some way that you could do that? Is there not some hardship you would be willing to undertake for the glory of God? For "What shall it profit you if you gain the whole world and lose your own soul?"

May we pray? Gracious Lord, the roots of our church seem so distant, yet the soil of our lives remains the same. We all have it so good today. Yet our world has not changed. Evil is still prevalent. People today, no less than in any other age, need to know the good news of your love and of the difference it can make in their lives. And you need us, Lord, as much as ever you needed Wesley or Asbury or Cartwright, to be your breaking plow, to 'ride the circuit,' or simply to tell a parched soul where to find the living water to quench their need. Use us, Lord. We place ourselves into your hands. And we pray that you would give us wisdom and give us courage for the faithful living of the days given to us. Amen.