

Riding Lead

*Yet our God gave us the courage to
declare his Good News to you boldly.*

1 THESSALONIANS 2:2 NLT



The wheeze of the respirator and the throb of the heart monitor cut the sticky air of the Intensive Care Unit hospital room. Tubes wound around Danny like a hangman's noose. *How can this be?* I wondered. *Danny's only in his early thirties.* I fluffed his pillow and pushed back the dark hair on his forehead. "I'll stop by tomorrow," I said as I gently squeezed his hand.

A single tear rolled down Danny's face as he gritted his teeth, the clear respirator tube getting in the way. He nodded his head and weakly squeezed back.

I poked my head into the waiting room where the pastor sat. "Have you had a chance to talk to him about the Lord?"

He nodded.

"Did he pray the prayer?" I asked.

He shook his head.

I shuffled out of the building, got into my car, and slammed the

door. *What is wrong with me? Why didn't I say something to Danny about Jesus?*

I drummed my fingers on the steering wheel as I pulled out on the street. A month ago Danny was riding horses, rounding up cattle, and helping his neighbors with their branding. A strapping cowboy, Danny and I had worked with wild horses together the year before. This spring he'd been diagnosed with Hodgkin's disease (also called Hodgkin's lymphoma). He'd been rushed through chemotherapy. A couple of days ago his lungs filled with fluid, so the doctors had pumped them out and put him on a respirator.

I drove to the barn, saddled Czar, and mentally beat myself up as I rode down the trail. *Danny's heard it all before*, I rationalized. I kicked Czar into a trot. I pictured myself standing in Danny's room. "Danny, what do you think about God?" In my mind I could see him laughing. He loved the rough-and-tough cowboy life. He didn't have the time or need for "weak, sissy, God stuff."

I slowed Czar to a walk as I thought about the situation. He's in ICU. *His situation must be pretty serious if they've put him on a respirator*. My guts tied in knots. As a Christian, I have good news I could have shared...the saving grace and love of Jesus. *But what would Danny say if I brought it up?* I knew I needed to tell him, but I was afraid of his ridicule.

The next afternoon Danny showed improvement. When I got there the respirator was gone. Danny croaked a hello, his throat still raw from the tube. I smiled. *He's improving; I can wait*. Then Danny coughed... a hoarse cough that ravaged his weak body. He brushed a tear from his eye. I glanced over his bony hand, his pale face, and his sunken eyes. *What if he doesn't pull through?*

I pulled a chair next to his bed and twisted a strand of my hair. *Better get to it or I'll lose my nerve*. I took a deep breath and spoke. "Danny, there's something I've been wanting to share with you."

His voice graveled, he asked, "What's that?"

"I don't know how to..."

He raised a bushy eyebrow.

I blurted, “Have you ever heard anything about Jesus?”

He leaned back in bed and then sat up as another deep, raspy cough shook his body. He wheezed when he replied, “A lot of folks have told me about Him.”

“Did you accept him as your Savior?”

Danny shrugged his shoulders and sank back into the bed.

“Has anybody told you *how* to make Him your Savior?” I persisted. He shook his head.

I was shocked. For weeks friends, family, and pastors had been praying and visiting with Danny, waiting for him to accept Jesus. . . but no one had remembered to tell him how to go about doing it.

“Would you like to accept Him as your Savior?” I asked.

Danny brushed his fingers through his hair as he whispered, “I’m scared. Scared I won’t make it out of here. Yeah.”

I wrapped my fingers around Danny’s skeletal hand. “It’s easy. All you have to do is talk to God. I’ll help you. Repeat this prayer after me.” As I spoke, Danny’s voice echoed my words:

“Lord, I am a sinner and can’t save myself. I believe that Jesus Christ died on the cross for my sins. He rose from the dead three days later so I can have eternal life and live with Him forever. I’m asking You, Lord Jesus, to come into my heart to be my Savior, to live in me, and to guide me from this day forward. Amen.”

Tears streamed down Danny’s face as he shook from a silent sob. I handed him a Kleenex and took one myself. After a moment he breathed a deep, contented sigh. He wiped his eyes and asked, “What’s heaven like?”

“I don’t know exactly. I hope the beauty of earth is a reflection of heaven—the mountains and valleys.”

Danny settled back into the pillows. “Do you think there are horses and cows?”

I chuckled. “I sure hope so. If there are, when I get there I’ll even let you ride lead on the herd. I’ll ride drag and eat dust.”

Danny smiled and weakly reached to shake my hand. “Deal.”

Those were the last moments I shared with Danny. I went out of town on business, and when I came home, the phone was ringing. Danny’s brother broke the news, saying, “Danny’s gone.”

Tears streamed down my face as I hung up. *What if I hadn’t asked the question? What if I’d waited?*

I reached for a tissue and glanced at a picture hanging on my wall. A cowboy was herding horses across a creek, and the sun was glinting off the splashing water. I grinned. *Danny, I bet you’re riding lead right now. You’re one blessed cowboy.*

*Lord, teach me to be courageous and bold enough to share
Your good news with folks—even if I think they don’t want
to hear it. Amen.*