

In Search of Shiloh

Volume I: The Shiloh Saga

And we know that all things work together for good to them that love the Lord, to them who are called according to His purpose. KJV c 1850, Romans 8:28.

Chapter 1

“Laurel, I wanna talk to you. Darlin’, leave the dishes and come set with me a spell.”

Mark Campbell pointed to the chair near his bed.

With a confused look on her face, Laurel looked across the room to the nook on the other side of the hearth where her father lay. Mark Campbell was not given to endearments, nor had he ever asked her to leave morning chores to sit with him. “Papa, are you hurtin’ this mornin’?”

“No more’n usual. Come over here and set yerself down, like I asked.”

Even at such an early hour, Laurel saw the weariness in her father’s eyes. He was mortally ill, and she knew his main concern was what would become of her when he was no longer around. Laurel sat in her Granny Wilson’s chair, brushed her fingertips across his cheeks, and breathed a sigh of relief that she felt no fever.

“Daughter, my time’s short. This blamed cough’s gettin’ worse ever day and my strength’s all but gone. Don’t mind so much for me....” Her father glanced up at a pen and ink drawing of her beautiful mother which hung over the mantle. “Spendin’ eternity with your mama in paradise ain’t exactly a scary thought.” A severe bout of coughing interrupted his remarks. Laurel handed him a handkerchief and turned her head. She knew the cloth would be stained with blood. He’d often told her that he hated this weakness. He closed his eyes and took a couple of sharp breaths.

“Rest now, Papa. We’ll talk more after your nap. Just sleep a while.”

“No.” Laurel’s father sharp reply suggested a renewed strength Laurel hadn’t seen in days. “We gotta talk. Gotta tell you the plans I made for ya.” Again, a hacking cough stopped

him. Laurel walked across the room to the hearth for hot water to make a tonic with honey, wild berries, and a bit of some amber colored elixir that Elizabeth Wilson had left. She knew her Papa didn't like the taste, but the hot brew seemed to help the cough.

“Here Papa, drink this. Whatever you want to tell me will wait.” She bent down to pull the quilt over his shoulders, and brushed his forehead with her lips. “Sip this and then sleep, Papa, just for a spell.”

“Can't wait, Laurel. Your Uncle Matthew found ya a place to teach at the subscription school at Shiloh Station. You got your schoolin', and you readin' all the time makes you more than suited. Good way for ya to earn your livin' once I'm gone.”

“Papa, I can't go to Shiloh Station. We've worked so hard to build our homestead. I can take care of us here, Papa.”

Her father attempted to push himself up. Laurel moved to help him place a pillow at his back. He took her hand and spoke in a low, stern voice. “Laurel Grace Campbell, you ain't a hearin' me. I ain't a tellin' you what you might do. I am tellin' you what's gonna happen. Girl, you mean more to me than I ever told ya.” Her father strangled and after several moments coughed up phlegm. He wiped his mouth with the bloody handkerchief he held. “Been real selfish lettin' you make us a home here after your mama died. You've been a comfort, 'specially since I been laid up with this wastin' disease.” He gasped for breath. “But it's been all about me.” His attempt to explain to Laurel brought on another bout of coughing. “I gotta look to your well-bein' now.” Mark Campbell lay back again and breathed deeply. Exhausted at the effort, he closed his eyes and slept.

She dropped another log onto the fire. Although Washington County had experienced an unusually mild winter, on this early March morning the weather was cold. She returned to the dishes, troubled by what her father said. How could Papa want her to move across the state and

leave their home? Hawthorn Chapel had been home more than fifteen years. Even if she wanted to go to Shiloh Station to teach, travelling that distance alone would be impossible. She shrugged her shoulders to dismiss the ridiculous idea, dried her hands, and crossed the room to pick up her mother's seventy-five-year-old King James Bible.

Laurel didn't have any special scripture in mind so she just opened the book and started to read. The first verse she found was Exodus 20:12. *Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee.* She flipped to another page, hoping to find words to ease the foreboding. She turned to Proverbs 6:20. *My child, keep thy father's commandment and forsake not the law of thy mother.* Laurel was no fool. The word obey rang out to her as if spoken aloud. She made one final attempt to find solace. The New Testament nearly always lifted her spirits. She turned toward the back of the Bible and put her finger on Luke 22:41. *And He was withdrawn from them about a stone's cast, and kneeled down, and prayed, Saying Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless, not my will, but thine, be done.*

Laurel sank to her knees before the hearth and allowed her tears to fall. "Father, please let my papa get well. You're the Great Healer. I'm so afraid. If it's Papa's time, I still don't want to leave my home. With your help I can live here by myself. I'd be so unhappy trying to make a life with strangers. Please help me." She couldn't mistake the meaning of the lesson she'd just learned in the Scripture. She was to agree to her papa's plan. "Not my will, but Yours. If You will give me the strength, I will try, but I don't think I can." As she arose, the foreboding didn't cripple her anymore, but she felt no peace. She would go to Shiloh Station if her Papa asked her to go. At the same time, she prayed he wouldn't.

About an hour later, Laurel rushed to her father's side. He awoke to a severe bout of coughing. "Papa, let me get the honey tonic for you. You don't suffer so when you sleep."

“No, Laurel. Come here. I gotta tell you before it gets worse. I wrote a letter to your Uncle Matthew when I knew my congestion was more than a simple catarrh. People don’t get rid of consumption. Matt arranged safe passage to Greene County.” Again, as he talked, the cough grew worse and his voice fainter. “You just have to get to Shiloh by the end of April when the school term starts. Matthew helped me arrange a good future for you, so you just have to get there on time, and...” Laurel stared at her father, who said nothing. Her grandmother’s mantle clock was the only sound, and it seemed louder than a gong in a church sanctuary. Finally, her father gasped out, “And they won’t hire an unmarried woman.”

An involuntary grimace flickered on Laurel’s face. She turned her face. What was he thinking? Had the pain addled his mind? Laurel was a spinster and likely to remain so. In rural Arkansas, an unwed woman beyond the age of twenty-five was destined to remain in her father’s house...permanently. That was especially true if the woman was plain, spectacle-wearing, independent-minded, and self-sufficient. Laurel was all those things. She had never had a suitor. Now her Papa was telling her that she had a stable future ahead. All she had to do was find a mate and convince this man whom she didn’t know to marry her within a month.

“Can’t you say something, Laurel?”

“What can I say, Papa?” She had never shared the fears and hurts arising from her spinsterhood with her father. The foreboding pushed her to the edge of her control. “Papa, you spoke of a good life waiting for me and then added conditions that make the entire thing impossible. Haven’t you ever looked at me?” Tears rolled down her cheeks. Laurel turned to go to the hearth, but before she could leave his nook, he called her back.

“Come back, girl. There’s more you need to know.” Laurel’s papa drew his hands through his disheveled hair. With a voice so gravelly, the words were nearly indiscernible, he said, “I sold the homestead and all our stock.”

“Did you say you sold our homestead?” He nodded.

“Why?” The sadness on his face told Laurel it was not by choice.

“The law, daughter....” After a few minutes, he continued. “I kept only your horse, the two mules, and the smaller wagon. You can take any of the family things you want. I want ya to safeguard the family records, Bibles, and all our family keepsakes. Amos Tomlin and his wife Lucinda will move into the homestead as soon as ya leave for Shiloh.”

Laurel threw her arms in the air. “Papa, what good will it do for me to go to Shiloh? I have no husband. No one has ever asked for my hand. No one wants me. Papa, look at me. I’m plain!”

Deep sobs racked her body as she poured out her heart for the first time in her adult life. Covering her face with her hands, all the hurt, the shards of her broken dreams which she had carried and hidden, were laid bare for her father to witness. “Please excuse me. I need some time alone.” She climbed the stairs to her loft and slumped in her mother’s rocking chair. She wept.

After a long while, she wiped her face, smoothed her hair back and returned to her work. She went to the porch to bring in wood. As the sun set behind the cabin, sunbeams streamed through the limbs of the apple trees in the orchard. Were there new buds on the apple trees? Those trees would be glorious soon. The fruit from the orchard always provided for her family, giving fresh apples in the summer and plenty of fruit to preserve in apple butter, jelly, cider, and ample slices for canning and drying. A blessing every season...Laurel smiled at the beautiful sight before her. She could survive alone if Papa didn’t get well. She knew how to care for animals, grow food in the garden, and harvest the fruits, grapes, and berries in the orchard. She knew where the nuts grew in the forest. But reality forced its way into her daydreams. Her father had sold the Campbell homestead to the Tomlins. She had no home. In her desperation she cried out, “Lord, what can I do?”

An almost audible reply came to her mind. “Child, remember My words. Honor your father and mother. Keep their commandment and follow their law. Live in My will. I am with you.” She stared at the mountains around her. Shortly Laurel shook herself to awareness and returned to the kitchen to prepare supper. Within half an hour, she had warmed the brown beans and ham, baked a fresh corn pone, and cooked the stewed potatoes with a spoon of butter she had just churned the day before. Thanks to her bountiful orchard, she had dried apples from which she made an apple pie, hoping to encourage her father to eat. After Laurel prepared a tray for him, she went to eat dinner with him, anxious to know how he would respond to their last conversation. When she pulled back the curtain to his nook, she found him upright and leaning against the carved headboard of his bed.

“Thanks, daughter. I’m real hungry.”

“That is a good sign, Papa. If you eat well, you can get your strength back.” They ate in silence. The room was warm and comfortable as the last of the western sun found its way into the cabin. It was a beautiful spring evening in the Ozark. After supper, Laurel took her father his warm brew, but he refused the mixture. Laurel sat with her back to him. He waited for her to open the conversation. She called up her courage and in a quiet, steady voice she spoke. “Papa, please forgive my sass this afternoon. When I heard all that self-pity pour out of my mouth, I was ashamed. I just didn’t think. I’m sorry.”

“Laurel, don’t apologize. Didn’t know you felt that way. You never let on that you wanted to get married. Thought you were satisfied here with me. You’re not plain, darlin’. You just never had a chance to learn womanly ways without your mama.”

“Papa, please let’s just speak truth to each other. I’ve known a long time I’m not pretty. That’s all right because I have other blessings. I know I’m smart, and I’ve had my schoolin’. I’ve learned to work hard, and I can take care of myself. Don’t worry about me.”

“Laurel, you didn’t let me finish tellin’ you what Uncle Matthew and me planned. Mark Campbell squared his shoulders and in a steady, deliberate voice he spoke. “Your intended will arrive here sometime this weekend, probably Saturday.”

She turned and stared at her father. She covered her face. How much more could she stand? Her father had arranged a marriage of convenience for her! She hardly heard another word he spoke.

“That’s the news that came in Uncle Matthew’s letter today. When he wrote me at the end of the summer to ask you to teach in Shiloh, I told him that I’d not consider such a dangerous trip through the mountains and foothills unless I was sure of a dependable guide. His letter told me he solved that problem. Matthew’s friend wants a wife. He’d even thought he’d send for a mail order bride. When he found out a good woman of an age to marry and of his own faith lived just across the state, he asked for your hand.”

“How can you match me with a man you never met?” Laurel couldn’t believe her father would offer her up as a piece of chattel, passed from one man to another. Laurel’s temper was near the surface. She felt her posture change. Her chin jutted out, her shoulders squared, and she lifted her head. Her voice was harsh and determined as she responded... “Papa, I will not...” But then her voice broke. No sooner were those rash words spoken than she saw the concern on her father’s face. Mark Campbell looked so defeated. She remembered her prayer and the almost audible reply. She lowered her defiant eyes. She couldn’t cause more distress for her sick father. “Papa, forgive my back talk...I will not disobey you. If you believe this is God’s will for me, I will obey you. You’ve always been a loving father and wanted the best for me.”

“Bless you, daughter. I should’ve told you more often, but I do love you, Laurel Grace. I hope you know I do.”

Volume 4: The Shiloh Saga

Chapter 1

Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time; Casting all your care upon Him; for He careth for you.

I Peter 5:6-7

A solitary figure knelt on the bank of Lost Creek. The homesteader's prayer lasted a long while. Water, dancing across the boulders and sand deposited from Crowley's Ridge, provided an anthem for the communion of this time for Patrick MacLayne. Only an occasional word from his prayer broke the stillness of the scene. The man, known as Mac in these parts, turned and sat on the bank of the creek, his long legs crossed Indian-style. He stared across the valley he and his wife, Laurel, had named Eden. This sanctuary was Heaven on earth. A myriad of trees in this virgin forest--every species, size, and age--provided a beautiful, perfect haven in every circumstance of his life. He sought solitude in this place whenever he needed God's presence, comfort, wisdom, and strength.

Mac began a conversation with his most trusted friend. "Dearest Father in Heaven, my pa always told me when one phase of life ends, You always provide a new one. I've heard Brother Matthew preach on more than one occasion that You never close a door on something good that You don't open a window to something better. I believe it, but now I need help in finding my way. I'm at a crossroad, and I don't know which way to go. What I choose to do will impact not only me, but Laurel, my kids, even the new baby not yet born, and my pa. I don't think I've ever felt so lost since you lifted me out of my mired, ugly past. Please show me some sign. Let me

know I'm livin' out your will. How can I be the husband I need to be? What do my kids need from me? Lord, I want to be the man You expect, but I'm not sure right now what that is. I fear my selfish ambitions will take the place of my family again. Show me how to put all these things in priority and how to do it to Your glory. In the name of Your Son, Amen."

Mac continued to sit in the serenity of Eden. He had no sense of time as he remained there, just looking, taking in the wonder of his homestead. On a branch, high up in an ancient hickory tree, two robins flitted back and forth, feeding their nestlings, one was male with his bright red breast clearly visible. He sat, serenading a smaller brown hen as she tended two hatchlings with their tiny beaks spread wide to receive a worm their mother had found for them. Across the opening, a doe nursed a fawn with spindly legs and splayed with white spots across its tawny fur. Not far away stood a large stag, standing guard over his new offspring. In the creek, a small school of fish, maybe a family of crappie, feeding in the clear creek water.

His meditation continued until he sensed—in a nearly audible voice—familiar scripture. *It is not good that man should be alone...And the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made he woman, and brought her unto the man. "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; She shall be called woman."*

"Laurel." Mac rose, words of gratitude on his lips.

The red-orange glow over Crowley's Ridge provided a breathtaking close to the busy day. Laurel relaxed into the rocking chair during those few minutes, a winsome smile on her face, and took in the glory of her home as the sun set. She wondered where her husband had gotten off to since mid-day. In truth, a more pertinent question plagued her more since Mac returned from the state capital. She searched for an answer. What had become of the man she'd married back in Washington county? He had not returned from Little Rock. Once again at their

noon meal today, his unpredictable moodiness threw a shadow across the time their family spent sharing dinner together. He didn't appear to be angry or upset. He was too quiet. He simply wasn't with them. He was overly accommodating, trying too hard to please everyone at home. Mac wasn't himself and hadn't been for the nearly six weeks he'd been back in Shiloh.

Laurel continued to rock, enfolding her barely extended belly as if to embrace her not yet born child. Humming the tune of an old lullaby, she glanced across the front of her beloved double-pen cabin. How wonderful it felt to be truly at home! How blessed she was. The last sun rays laced through the branches of the budding trees to the west as Mac rode Midnight into the yard.

"Hello, wife. I'm glad to see you restin' some this evenin'. How are you feelin' this afternoon?"

"Blessed. You've been gone a long time. I was beginning to think I'd need to send Roy out to bring you home."

"You won't ever have to do that. You know I've got no plans to leave you alone again." Mac flashed one of his smiles that endeared him to everyone.

"That's what you've said...more than once, I recall."

"Laurel, love, do you doubt my promise?"

"I know you mean to keep your word."

"Are you upset with me about something, wife? Have I done anything to cause you to think I am planning to leave again?"

"Patrick, are you satisfied at home since you returned from Little Rock?"

"What made you ask me that? I've not talked about leavin' or even about a return to politics. We haven't argued or been at odds about plans for the homestead. I'm curious as to why you'd bring this up now."

“True. You have been very agreeable. You bend over backwards to keep the peace, to make everything go smoothly, but you’ve been almost a stranger. I was just sitting here wondering where Mac MacLayne, the man I love and sent to the legislature without me in January had gotten off to...I’m not sure he’s come home to us, yet.” Laurel turned to face him in an attempt to make eye contact with her husband.

Dragging his hands through his hair, he turned and walked to the stairs to sit down. His shoulders drooped, and he cast his eyes toward his well-worn boots. Laurel felt the despondency come over them both. Pushing herself from her rocking chair, she walked over to where he sat. Placing her hand on his shoulder to steady herself, she sat next to him. She took his hand, brought it to her lips, and waited for him to share what was on his heart.

“I had to get away this afternoon, Laurel. I went to Eden. I sat there a long time—right now, I’m pretty confused—I have so many questions that I can’t answer. I spent the entire afternoon, looking, thinking, and praying for some answers. I can’t say I found even one.”

Squeezing his hand, she smiled tentatively, but he didn’t look at her. A blank stare was contrary to the empathetic expression she wanted to display. She wished she understood his uneasiness. Her life was better, richer, and happier than she’d ever known. Shiloh was paradise. How could he want anything more? Fearing she’d say the wrong thing, Laurel didn’t respond to his honest, humble admission.

“I don’t think I can talk to Matthew about all this confusion. He’s so sure of his call—his place in this world. He tries to understand when I tell him of my uncertainty of whether I’m doing what the Lord wants me to do. If I were living in His will, would I have such doubt, Laurel?” He looked into her eyes with such anguish, Laurel sensed his hurt and emptiness. “If I were supposed to be satisfied here, would I find the day-to-day routine on our homestead so

tedious and boring? Surely, I wouldn't feel such a draw to do more! Laurel, I prayed all afternoon. I got no answer at all."

Quiet fell between them for a while. Laurel didn't move away or relinquish Mac's hand. Tears laced her lashes as she felt the chasm between them. Yet, she'd never felt closer to him. The moon rose over the tree-line silhouetted against the night sky. Mac picked up her other hand and brought both of them to his bearded cheek.

"How I love you, Laurel Grace MacLayne. That is the one fact the Lord clearly revealed to me again today. As I admitted how lost I feel, I sensed Him speaking to me. When I cried out 'Show me the way!' only one image came to my mind. Without any sense of doubt, you will be beside me. Right now, I dread the future. I believe things are going to get hard for us and for Shiloh. Regardless, you will be with me, always loving me and supporting me. I know it to the depth of my soul."

"Somehow I know whatever your fear is right now, you aren't questioning my love. I am your wife. Patrick. I do love you. I am grateful for the wonderful life we have together. As long as the Lord allows, I will always be beside you."

Mac pulled Laurel into an embrace. As he lowered his head to kiss her, the front door slammed behind Andy, the miniature of himself.

"Mama, Cathy says if y'all don't come and eat supper now they ain't gonna be no soup left in them beans, and the roast will be dry enough to cut me soles for my boots."

"Yes, Andy. We're coming. Mac, let's finish this conversation at bedtime. I'm hungry now, and those young'uns must be starving."

Later, after seeing the kids to bed, Mac retired to the second pen bedroom, the private domain for his wife and himself. He sat near the cold fireplace and pushed his boots off. His face reflected the intensity of his troubled mood. He slumped and sighed so loudly that Laurel turned

to stare at him as she closed the door to their sanctuary. An unusual downturned mouth and creases across his forehead marked his handsome face.

“You’ll feel so much better if you’ll get everything off your chest. Good or bad, I will listen to you. Darlin’, our conversation ended mid-stream this afternoon. Please just pick it up and get the load you’re carrying off ‘our’ chests. If it is bothering you, it is bothering me too...even more so if I don’t know the reason.”

“Wouldn’t know where to start.”

“I suggest you start where it started. When you went back to the legislature, you were optimistic and confident you were doing the right thing. What happened down there?”

“The only good thing I did was to help create a new county. Of course, that lost me my seat because now we live in that new county.”

“Do you think that’s bad? You told me you were ready to stay home. Or if not, you can travel south instead of north and campaign in Craighead county.”

“Laurel, it’s not that easy. The county has to start from scratch. Right now, we have two appointed officials—a sheriff and a judge.”

“Sounds like plenty of opportunity to find a way to serve. That is what you like to do—build things from the ground up.”

“You don’t understand how the political system works, wife.”

“Teach me then.”

“Awwwgh! Laurel Grace.” Mac pulled her into his lap. Her spitfire behavior and lighthearted defiance lightened the mood of the room. He kissed her, and she snuggled into his shoulder. “You nagged me into talkin’. I feel better.”

“You aren’t getting off that easily. You’ve been a horror to live with for more than six weeks. I want to know the rest of it. Talk.”

“Are you feeling all right, Laurel? Is the baby...”

“We aren’t talking about me. What happened at the legislature?”

“Nothing...too much...I didn’t expect what happened, I guess. I went down there with a naïve view of what service in the state house would be and got it knocked right out of me.”

“Knocked out of you? Did you get hurt, Patrick?”

“Not really. I had a brief scuffle with a couple of ruffians who didn’t like how I voted. Split my lip, but I won that brawl.”

“Mac!”

“I suppose that was what caused the final disenchantment with public service for me. Most everyone there seems bent on getting what they want, not what will most benefit the people who elected them. Men who I believed to be honest made deals, took bribes and threatened delegates who disagreed with them. Politics is too dirty a vocation for an ethical person.”

“You knew that before you decided to run. You told me yourself how ugly men can be in a struggle over power. Mac, you said this afternoon you’ve come home filled with dread. You are afraid for our future. Surely, things aren’t that bad. If they are, that is not like you. The Mac I know would be headed back to Little Rock to fight for what he thought was the best thing for our state. Your faith is so strong.”

“Laurel, things are as bad as I’ve ever known them to be. State representatives’ talk about dividing Arkansas is rampant. Threats to life and property are not jokes. I want ...” He lifted her hands to his cheeks.

“Please finish what you were saying. You are scaring me.”

“Laurel, the old political machine that has run Arkansas since statehood is disintegrating. Men who see opportunities to get bigger pieces of political power are out to get their share. They use any means at their disposal to put laws into place that promote their schemes. That’s why I

had to defend myself two days before adjournment. I broke the arm of one man who threatened my family. I lost my temper.”

“He must have been bluffing.”

“I thought so, but the day I left Little Rock, one of the senators stopped me on the steps of the capitol. He said I’d been an obstacle to them during the entire session. He said I’d better watch out because the retribution wasn’t over. Even when I told him I’d cause no more problems because I’d lost my seat, he said I’d be sorry I took up sides against the party in power.”

“Do you think our family is in harm’s way?”

“I don’t know. I pray not, but I still try to keep up with the news around the area and reports of newcomers and strangers at Shiloh and Greensboro.”

“I suppose we can’t do much more.”

“I don’t know of anything else. I’ll watch out for our family, Laurel. I promise you that. I don’t believe I can stand any more loss. Your papa, my ma, our baby...we’ve dealt with enough grief in our short time together.”

“Yes, we’ve had some hard times, but we’ve shared a lot of joy too. The Lord has seen us through.

“There is one more thing I need to tell you tonight, wife. Through this session, I struggled with my faith. Parts of my old life slipped back into my routine during my work in the legislature. My temper became hard to control. I found myself cursing too often, and the urge to attack the people who plagued me was a daily event. Laurel, I haven’t dealt with these old sins since the Lord showed me a better life. I found that old me too often. I hate that man. You’d hate him, too. No career’s worth losing what I’ve found in Shiloh.”

“Patrick, your faith is much too strong to die. That old person I have never known, nor do I expect to ever meet him.”

“Laurel, I am serious. That is the main reason I spent so much time on my knees down in Eden this afternoon. If I can’t control those things, I can never go back into the political arena. Power is a powerful temptation for me. I’ve seen myself and how I act when I feel threatened with its loss. Pray for me, Laurel. I’m not sure if I can be a farmer, like you want me to be, but I will be your husband and a good father to our offspring--all of them.”

“You already are. Better than I ever thought I’d have. Thank you for telling me what you’ve been carrying alone. I love you. I want to share your life. We will be much happier when you let me be your full partner. I hope you see I’m not the frail, broken girl you married three years ago. Your love and belief in me have helped me grow into a better woman. You helped me claim God’s grace. With that and a wonderful man like you beside me, I’ll be your true helpmate. You have made me very happy, even with all the serious talk we’ve done today. Let’s go to bed. Your son is kicking me pretty hard this evening. I’m more tired than I knew.”

