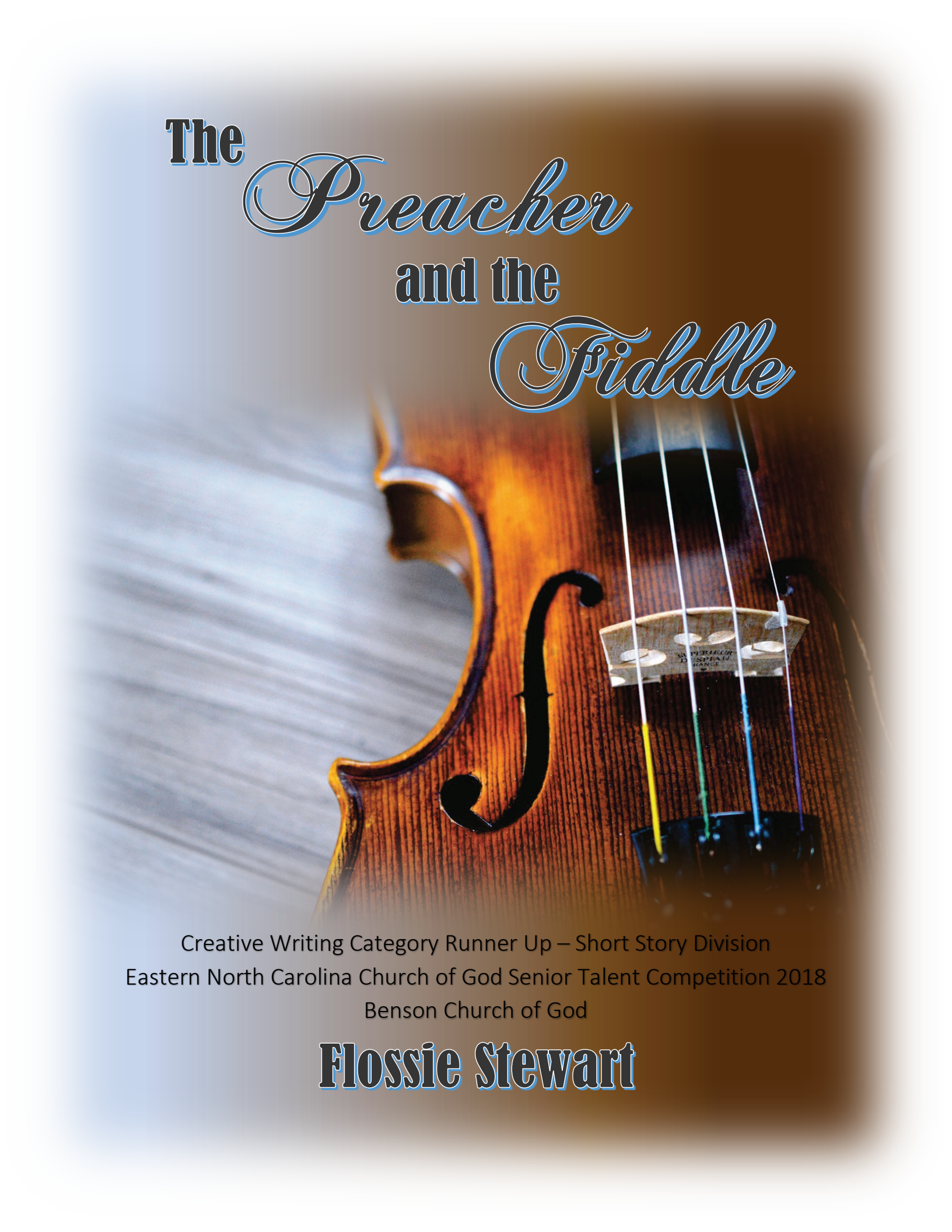




The *Preacher* and the *Fiddle*

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The *Preacher* and the *Fiddle*

The lonely, crumbling old white clapboard church building on Righteous Street, in the town of Gloryville, almost seemed to weep as Frank, the town mayor, stood gazing at it, reminiscing of his memories there. His hands in his pockets, his thinning, salt and pepper hair fluttered listlessly in the cool, late September breeze as he noted the deterioration. As leaves fell all around him and a dog barked in the distance, it saddened him that it had come to this. He frowned as he noticed the time-worn steeple, well remembering the comforting hymns that had played from the bells as he was growing up.

There was no parking lot, only dirt and gravel. He didn't know when the broken down church bus had last been used. Pulling out his notepad, he walked around the building, making notes. The meeting with the Planning Board was in a couple of hours, though he didn't expect it to go well.

There were boards loose in several places. The paint was peeling, the bells no longer worked, and he didn't doubt the wiring was badly out of code. Jiggling the front door knob, he noted that the door was wobbly. The door frame, and the entire front had accumulated weather damage over time. He knew without going inside that there was no heat or air conditioning. They'd been using a small space heater since last year, and box fans in the summer. For that reason alone, several families had left.

He'd been told they needed more Sunday School rooms, and that they still didn't have a pastor. The run-down parsonage sitting next to it had been vacant since January, the pastor, Dale Hensley, and his wife, Nadine, long gone. As more once faithful members had left, there hadn't been enough funds for repairs. With hardly anyone in the Christmas spirit, Christmas of 2017 had

been a disaster. Finally, in tears, they'd thrown their hands up and left. The Hensleys were only the latest victims of the church's long-running problems. Guilt gnawed at him. Maybe he should have never left.

Back in the 80s, when he'd been a teenager, J.B. Worthington, Sr. had been the pastor. He'd married him and his wife, Gloria, and he'd performed the dedications of all three of their children. He'd also led some powerful Holy Ghost fire-filled revivals. After he'd passed away, his wife, Lou Ann, had moved back to Atlanta, Georgia where her family lived.

Their son, J.B. Jr., had talked of feeling led to become a preacher. Everyone had thought he'd take over the church when his dad retired. But the pastor's unexpected death had left his mother in shambles. Not wanting to leave her to go through it alone, he'd moved with her, finished school there, and gotten a job to help with the bills. As far as he knew, no one had seen or heard from him since.

Considering the staggering amount of money it would take to get the renovations done, he knew the Board would see no reason to decide in their favor. With the lack of unity and organization that had long existed in the church, he didn't expect many of them to show up in the church's defense, although he'd heard plenty of complaints. With no real benefit to the community established, neighbors complaining that the old building was an eyesore, and prospective buyers already eying the property, it appeared the old Hickory Creek Church of God would soon be history. With one last lingering glance, he turned and headed back to his truck. He had just enough time to grab some lunch before he headed to the meeting. He was almost to the truck when he heard a car pull into the church yard behind him.

"Mayor Frank! Just the one I was hoping to see!" Ted Stamphill called out as Frank turned and walked toward him.

“Ted! How’s it going?”

“Oh, it’s going. They said I might find you here. I was hoping to speak with you about the church before the meeting today.”

“Well, I was just finishing here, getting ready to go grab a bite to eat. Why don’t you join me and we’ll talk over some lunch? Uncle Paul’s okay?”

“Sure, sounds great, I’ll meet you there!”

“Alright, buddy, see you in a few!” The mayor waved as Ted drove off.

A few minutes later, they were sitting at a table by the window at Uncle Paul’s Sandwich Barn, enjoying steak sandwiches and home fries, a town favorite.

After they’d asked the blessing, the mayor spoke first. “So, what can I do for you?”

“I know this thing’s probably not gonna go in our favor, but I just thought if I could fill you in on what all I’ve been doing to save it, maybe you might could somehow sway them in favor of working with us somehow.”

“Okay, I’m listening, go on.” Frank took a bite of his sandwich. He liked to hear what people had to say before he just launched into the legalities.

“We’ve been trying to organize some fund raising projects. I’ve also spoken to a couple of evangelists about preaching for us. I’ve been talking to Sister Peggy Morgan about trying to get the choir going again, and organizing a simple Christmas Cantata. I mean, I think we could make it if the town was just willing to work with us.”

Frank thought a moment before he spoke, taking another sip of his tea. “Well, Ted, I’m certainly willing to do what I can. I know you’ve worked hard, and it shows. But we have to be realistic here. This church has been falling apart for a long time, ever since J.B. Sr. died. There’s got to be unity in the church, just as Paul tried to teach us, and this church just doesn’t have that

anymore. There's gotta be outreach, meeting people's needs, and working together if you want the church to grow. What you need is a miracle, the kind that only comes through a lot of prayer. I'm talking sincere, repentant, heartfelt prayer." He paused a moment. "I'll tell you what. I'm pretty sure we'll have a decision by four or five o'clock. But no matter what happens, you need to get the church folks together and pray for a miracle."

"I guess you're right, Frank."

"Of course, I am. Matthew eighteen, verses nineteen and twenty says if any two ask it in His name, it will be done, and that where two or more are gathered in His name, He's right there. And Romans eight and twenty-eight says He'll work all things for good to those that love Him and are called according to His purpose. Those are His promises to us and His Word will not return to Him void. Now, I gotta get going, but let's pray first."

Later, as he thought about it, he knew the mayor was right. Getting them all back into the unity that God was looking for would be easier said than done. Of course, he'd invited Mayor Frank and his wife to come to church Sunday. He would leave no stone unturned.

It was almost four-thirty when Ted's cell phone rang. His heart sank as Frank told him the news. The decision had been made. The church property would be seized by eminent domain, effective two weeks from the following Monday. Plans were already in motion for a much needed medical clinic to be built on the site.

That evening, tears fell down his cheeks as he sat alone on the front pew, waiting for the others to arrive. When only a handful of them showed up, he wondered why he'd even bothered. No one cared. It was hopeless, or was it? No. He wouldn't give up. He couldn't.

“I know it looks hopeless,” he began, his voice breaking as several of them began to weep, “but we can’t give up now. That’s what the enemy wants. Just like Peter, we must keep our eyes on the Master, not our situation,” he reminded them as they took hands and began praying.

The rest of the week passed uneventfully. They arrived on Sunday morning to find a rather dirty looking homeless man, asleep at the front door. Curled up in a tattered old blanket, he awoke, asking them if he could come in where it was warmer. Reluctantly, they agreed, knowing the tricks robbers had recently used to gain entry into area churches. Once inside, he sat on the back pew, opening a tattered old bag he’d carried and pulling out a worn out old fiddle with two of its strings broken. Taking the bow, he began to play what sounded like “Amazing Grace” on the remaining strings. Although he tried his best, it was squeaky and irritating.

As Timothy Weston, the evangelist Ted had invited, prepared to begin the service, the man continued to play, somewhat more softly, yet nonetheless, irking some of the members. Some got up and moved further away. Others looked at him with disgust and annoyance as they walked into the church. No one spoke to him or asked if he was hungry. Finally, the preacher walked over to him and politely, but nervously asked him if he could go into one of the Sunday School rooms to play. As tears filled his eyes, he got up, put the fiddle back into his bag, and started toward the front door. Then turning back to the congregation, his hurt obvious, his voice quivering, he only said, “If ye have done it unto the least of these, ye have done it unto Me”, and walked out, closing the door firmly behind him.

“Shame on you, all of you!” Clara Bridges shouted, in tears as she stood up, her blond curls bouncing as she shook her head. At sixty, she’d carried her age well. Without another word, she stalked to the door, her pink skirt swishing, and walked out, looking both ways, but the poor man was long gone. No one had even gotten his name.

Finally, the day of their last service had come. Everyone was somber as they slowly filed into the sanctuary. Some brought flowers or gifts for others. Ted had dismissed the evangelist for his treatment of the poor man. He was just getting ready to speak when the front door suddenly burst open, spilling sunlight into the room as everyone turned to see who it was.

A handsome, clean-cut man wearing a nice silver-colored suit came in, slowly making his way up the aisle playing “His Eye is on the Sparrow” on a polished, brand new fiddle. It was the most beautiful playing they’d ever heard. It was when he began playing “Amazing Grace” that recognition suddenly flooded their faces. No one made a sound. Ted stepped down into the aisle and moved closer.

“It’s you!” Ted’s gaze was fixed on him as he now lowered the fiddle. Same brown hair, and green eyes. It was the homeless man from the Sunday before.

“Name’s Jacob Brantley Worthington Jr. I’m your new pastor”, he said, putting the fiddle away. That evangelist you just sent away, he’s now my step-dad. He and Mama just got married in June. The funds for the church repairs and everything’s been taken care of. Renovations will begin immediately. Now, I’ve already given you a demonstration of my first message,” he continued, pulling his Bible out as he made his way to the podium. “So, if you have your Bibles, turn to Matthew, chapter twenty-five, verses thirty-one through forty-six!”

Lou Ann and Timothy, and Mayor Frank Weston and his wife all slipped in quietly and sat down near the front. It was a proud day for Lou Ann, hearing her son’s first sermon. It was also a day of wonderful new beginnings for the mayor, who was proud of his son, Evangelist Timothy Weston.