

CALEB, SON OF NONE



CALEB PASCAL & THE PECULIAR PEOPLE

CALEB, SON OF NONE

KERSTEN HAMILTON

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Bringing The Word to Life

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Summary: When the circus comes to town and Caleb, an orphan, meets a gentle animal trainer who reads the Bible and prays to his "Papa," Caleb decides to run away from the cruel Mr. Groeger and find a better life.

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Dedication

for James, a true son



Peculiar People in the title of this series is what is known as a play on words.

Today the word *peculiar* has the meaning of being strange. An odd or unusual thing or person is described as peculiar.

But there's an older meaning of the word *peculiar* too. The *King James Version* of the Bible (published in the year 1611) used *peculiar* in this older meaning.

“The LORD hath chosen Jacob unto himself, and Israel for his peculiar treasure” (Psalm 135:4).

Jesus “gave himself for us, that he might redeem us . . . and purify unto himself a peculiar people” (Titus 2:14).

“Ye are a chosen generation . . . a peculiar people” (1 Peter 2:9).

In these verses, people who follow the Lord are called “peculiar.” But it doesn't mean they are strange. What *does* it mean? It means that the Lord's people are his treasured possession, his very own, singled out to belong to him.

In this series you'll follow Caleb in his adventures with all kinds of people—people who are . . . well, peculiar!

1884



CHAPTER 1

*Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a
longing fulfilled is a tree of life.*

—*Proverbs 13:12*

“Is he there, Caleb? Is your new papa there?”

“Hush, Jack.” Caleb frowned. Jack was trying to pull himself up high enough to see in the window too, and if he kept kicking at the wall, everyone inside was going to hear. Caleb put a knee under the smaller boy’s seat and boosted him up until his hands could grip the windowsill. “Now keep quiet.”

The faces of the people in the church were as solemn as the preacher’s voice.

“The Lord Jesus said, ‘Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!’” The preacher said something about graves that were “full of dead men’s bones, and of all uncleanness.” His voice boomed over the crowd.

“What are they doing?” Jack whispered.

“Reviving, that’s what.” Caleb glanced toward a woman dozing in the shade of a silver maple tree, her eyes half shut and mouth slack. Miss Pratt had said she didn’t need reviving, so they would just wait outside until it was over.

“Which one is Mr. Groeger?” Jack asked.

“Probably the biggest one in there,” Caleb said.

Jack nodded.

Caleb would have said “likely the richest too,” but he didn’t want Jack to feel too bad. Jack lived at Miss Pratt’s on account of his mama being dead, but he had a papa, a real cowboy who sent money for his room and board. If Jack’s papa were as rich as Mr. Groeger, Jack would be with him right now.

“What’s Mr. Groeger look like?” Jack whispered.

“I don’t know,” Caleb whispered back.

“But he’s adopting you, right?”

Caleb nodded.

“*Mr. Groeger wants a boy.*” That’s what Miss Pratt had said. “*Robert Groeger wants a boy. You pack your things, ’cause you’re not coming back.*”

“I expect he’ll let you have a horse,” Jack said wistfully. “Since he’s got all them saddles. He’ll let you have one, all right!”

“Yep,” Caleb said happily. They’d stood in front of Groeger’s Saddles, Boots and Fine Leather Goods a thousand times, admiring the saddles in the window and wondering which one Jack’s papa would buy for him when he came riding up the trail to take Jack home.

Suddenly, Caleb's cap twitched, hopped, and tried to jump right off his head. He grabbed it, glancing at Miss Pratt to make sure she was still asleep.

"Be still," he whispered into the cap. "We'll be home soon."

Home. Caleb shivered with happiness at the sound of the word. He had been at Miss Pratt's his whole life, in the same room in the same bunk. Now he was going *home* with Mr. Groeger. He settled his cap back on his head.

"Those Pharisees looked good on the outside, all right," the storm-preacher rumbled. "But God don't look at the outside, and we shouldn't either!"

"That's him!" Jack whispered and pointed with his chin.

"Don't you know anything?" Caleb said. "That's J. R. Rickman. He's the one who went to Australia and come back with a real, live, taxidermed kangaroo. J. R.'s kangaroo is practically famous!"

"For Heaven's sake, get down from there before someone sees you!" Miss Pratt had shaken herself awake. "Get over here and sit down, both of you!"

Caleb tried to sit still beside Miss Pratt, but he couldn't help jiggling a little.

The preacher's voice came floating out the window.

"We shouldn't just listen to the Word of God," the preacher was saying. "We should do what it says! Are you Christians, full of grace and life? Or are you whitewashed tombs, full of sin and dead men's bones?"

Someone inside sobbed.

“They’ll be a while yet,” Miss Pratt said. “I don’t want either of you fooling around! You,” she pointed a long finger at Caleb’s nose, “stay put!”

“Yes, ma’am,” Caleb said. Miss Pratt closed her eyes and leaned against the tree again.

Caleb scratched pictures in the dirt to keep Jack occupied. Finally there was a great shuffling sound from inside the church, and people started to sing.

“Come on,” Miss Pratt stood up and grabbed Caleb’s collar and Jack’s hand. “They’ll be coming out.” She pulled the boys toward the front of the building.

They were standing on the street when the wide doors opened, and the preacher stepped out onto the steps. Men and women poured out after him, stopping to shake his hand.

“That’s him!” Miss Pratt said as a huge man stepped out.

“He’s big, all right,” Jack whispered.

Robert Groeger stood a whole head taller than the preacher. His hair was brushed back like Buffalo Bill’s, and he had a moustache like him too. His coat was sharp and well cut, and his boots were shiny.

“He’s got a *girl!*” Jack gasped.

Caleb studied the little girl standing in Mr. Groeger’s shadow. She was almost a baby—four or five maybe, like Jack had been when he first came to Miss Pratt. She had little button boots, white stockings sticking out from under her long skirt, and a big bow on her head.

“No wonder he wants a boy.” Jack shook his head.

“She’s not his,” Miss Pratt said. “That’s Widow McRory’s

little girl. She's his niece. Oh, Mr. Groeger!" Miss Pratt called, as the man hurried down the steps. The little girl was running to keep up. Mr. Groeger must not have heard, because he kept right on walking.

"Hurry!" Miss Pratt said and grabbed Caleb's collar again, pulling him along. "I didn't wait out here all mornin' for nothing!"

Mr. Groeger was lifting the little girl up onto the seat of his wagon when they caught up. Miss Pratt pushed Caleb forward, and he caught the scent of sweet hair oil and something else, something that made his nose wrinkle. Caleb looked suspiciously at the little girl. Maybe she was what smelled so funny.

"Mr. Groeger!" Miss Pratt said loudly. "Here's the boy I told you about. His name's Caleb."

"Last name?" Mr. Groeger's voice was hard as gravel.

Jack started gulping, and Caleb knuckle-punched him in the arm, right where it would hurt the most.

"Thanks," Jack whispered when the gulping stopped. Jack always threw up when he was scared. A knuckle-punch hurt, but not as bad as a switching—and that's what he'd get if he threw up.

"Last name?" Mr. Groeger asked again.

"His mama didn't think to give him one," Miss Pratt shrugged. "Threw him in the trash with some worn-out shoes on her way out of town. The charity committee burned the shoes and sent the baby to me."

"I know how an orphan asylum works, Miss Pratt. Don't you have anyone bigger?"

“He’s the oldest one I’ve got right now,” Miss Pratt said. “He’s had three years of schooling. He can read, write, and figure. The committee said I could hire him out when he turned nine, and that was last week.”

Mr. Groeger pulled a wallet from his breast pocket.

“I’m not hiring him from you,” he said, handing her a bill. “You won’t get another cent out of me. Where are his things?”

“He’s wearing them.”

“Get in the wagon, boy.”

Caleb looked at Miss Pratt.

She said, “You’re Mr. Groeger’s problem now.” She tucked the money into her pocket, took Jack’s hand, and said, “Go on.”

Caleb clambered up the spokes of the wheel and over the side into the wagon bed. The little girl peeked at him as Mr. Groeger climbed into the driver’s seat.

“See you,” Jack called.

Caleb grabbed the side of the wagon to keep from tumbling out as it started forward. He turned to wave, but Miss Pratt was already dragging Jack down the street. Caleb studied the back of Mr. Groeger’s head. Of course, a big man like that would want a big son. Caleb sat up a little taller. He would make up for being small by being the best son in the world, that’s what.

When they reached the end of the lane, they didn’t turn toward the center of town, toward Groeger’s shop. They turned toward the cattle yards.

“I want to go home, Uncle Rob,” the little girl said.

“I have some business to attend to first, Mary.” Mr. Groeger’s voice didn’t have the sharp edges anymore. It sounded almost nice.

Caleb smiled and looked around to see if anyone had noticed him riding along with Mr. Groeger. But they were passing the auction yard, and it was empty. The town of Cottonwood had grown up right where the cattle trail met the railroad line. They raised winter wheat and sheep mostly. But in a few more weeks, when the trail herds started coming, the pens would be full of Texas longhorns, the streets would be full of cowboys, and the saloons would be open all night.

They turned again at the yards, toward the only building visible on the prairie. A tight, three-strand barbed wire fence ran along the road all the way to it. The wagon stopped in the yard of the lonely building, beside a pen of spring lambs.

“Stay right here, Mary,” Mr. Groeger said, climbing down. “This won’t take long. Caleb, you come with me.” Caleb jumped down and followed him around the corner of the building, trying to match his steps to Mr. Groeger’s longer strides.

The butcher was just hanging a carcass on a hook, the last in a long row.

“Robert!” he greeted Mr. Groeger. “Who’s your friend?”

“My new boy,” Mr. Groeger said.

Caleb tried to look taller.

“He’ll be helping me around the shop. I hope I haven’t made a mistake, but I need the help.”

“He looks like a fine boy,” the butcher winked at Caleb. “I have a good lot of hides for you today, Robert.” He waved

a bloody hand in the direction of a pile of lambskins.

“Then you’ve learned to be more careful with the skinning knife?” Mr. Groeger picked up a lambskin and examined it. “Nicked,” he said, tossing it aside. “I’ll pay half price.”

Caleb watched as Mr. Groeger examined each hide carefully. His new papa was smart, all right. The ones with sores, or where the skinning knife had left the tiniest hole, went into the half-price pile on the floor. The others were stacked in Caleb’s arms.

“Put the good ones in the wagon,” Mr. Groeger said when he had sorted through them all. “Then come back for the rest.”

Caleb walked back to the wagon and dumped the armload of skins in a heap in the bed. Mary’s eyes went from the fresh hides to the lambs still waiting in the pen. Her mouth made a little *O*, and her eyes grew very wide.

“Your uncle’s almost done,” Caleb said, taking a breath of fresh air. The inside of the slaughterhouse didn’t smell so good. “So we’ll be going pretty soon.”

Mr. Groeger was still haggling over the price when Caleb came back around the corner. When the two men agreed at last, Mr. Groeger pointed to the pile of lambskins he’d tossed to the floor.

“Bring them all,” he said. Caleb gathered them up. There were twice as many damaged fleeces as there had been good ones. He staggered along after Mr. Groeger, trying not to drop any.

“Where’s Mary gone?” Mr. Groeger asked as Caleb heaved the fleeces into the wagon bed.

“She was here a minute ago,” Caleb answered.

“There,” Mr. Groeger pointed. The little girl was headed back toward town, marching right down the middle of the road. “That child’s more bullheaded than her mother ever was,” Mr. Groeger said. “Get in. We’ll catch up.”

Mary looked over her shoulder when she heard the horse’s hooves close behind her.

“Get over here, young lady,” Mr. Groeger reined the horse to a stop.

“No!” Mary backed into the dry sunflower stalks by the side of the road.

Mr. Groeger wrapped the reins around the brake lever and jumped down from the wagon.

When Mary saw him coming, she lay down in the dirt—skirts, hair bow, and all—and rolled under the barbed wire. Then she scrambled out of reach.

“Come out, Mary.” Mr. Groeger’s voice was coaxing now. “It’s time to go home.” Mary folded her arms. Her bow wobbled as she shook her head.

“Get out here!” Mr. Groeger thundered. He was too big to roll under, and Caleb figured he didn’t want to risk his good suit by climbing over the barbed wire. Mary sniffed, then wiped her nose on her arm.

“I’ll bring her home, Pa—”

Caleb wanted to say “Papa,” wanted it so bad it hurt, but he couldn’t. Not until he’d shown Mr. Groeger what a good son he’d found. Not until Mr. Groeger knew that he hadn’t made a mistake.

“I mean sir,” Caleb said. “I’ll bring her home, sir.”

