It was quiet in Uncle Bill's house; so quiet, in fact, that Nick knew he'd be able to hear the proverbial pin drop if one dropped. But then, everything surrounding his uncle's house was such that it only added to the deep quietness and stillness. He had thought, when his uncle invited him to spend the summer at his ranch far up in the hills of Oregon, that it would be the ultimate vacation: the once-in-a-lifetime sort of thing. But he hadn't anticipated the intense silence nor the miles and miles that separated his uncle's spread from the rest of humanity. And from the world, really.
Nick slapped the leg of his pants with the palm of his hand then stood to his feet and brushed the dust and dirt from his jeans, wishing there were some way he could get into the city for the day. He missed the noise of the city; missed the convenience of a fast food restaurant too. What he wouldn't give for a big, juicy-thick cheeseburger and french fries! he thought, as he walked away from the tree stump where he had been sitting and headed for the house.

His uncle had told him to make himself at home while he did a quick early morning check on five miles of fencing, to make sure there were no breaks or holes for the cattle to slip through and wander away, and now, with seemingly nothing to do, Nick wished he'd have accepted his uncle's offer to saddle up and ride along. But he was a tenderfoot to Uncle Bill's rugged way of life, and to ride in the saddle for all that time had no appeal to him. He remembered how horribly sore and stiff he'd been those two times when he took his uncle up on the offer for him to ride along when he first arrived at the ranch. The pain and agony of his sore muscles and stiff body remained deeply etched in his memory. He didn't savor or desire another such experience. No indeed.

"Give Candy free rein, Nick," Uncle Bill had told him as he climbed into the saddle of the gentle mare. "She knows where we're going; trust her. And lean into the saddle; sort of flow with the gait. Relax, Nick. Relax. It's a great way to greet the dawn and to view the land."

No matter how hard he tried to relax or to flow with the horse's gentle but steady gait, the saddle seemed to always either come up to meet him or his body slammed down hard to meet it, and by the time he had ridden for four hours he was sure he would never again be able to walk straight or stand erect. After the second attempt of "greeting the dawn and viewing the land" from the saddle on Candy's back, he decided he'd had enough: he would view the surrounding hills and mountains some other way if he decided to see them. The saddle and he were in opposition to each other; they didn't conform.

Nick walked into the kitchen now and slid the cast iron skillet to the front burner on the stove, marveling how utterly clean his uncle kept everything, including the stove. He knew Aunt Katharine's death had left a void in the house that no one could fill for Uncle William and he had wondered, before getting to the ranch, if the loneliness and the void would
have affected the gentle man until he would have no concern whatever for and about its cleanness and its orderliness. But such was not the case; everything looked just as clean and neat as when his aunt had been the sole homemaker and cook.

He might have known, he thought, as he poured pancake mix from a pitcher into the hot skillet. No one made better sourdough pancakes than his uncle. They were delicious, light and airy, and they stuck to the ribs. Nick was sure he could eat them three times a day and never tire of them. For so long as he could remember, Uncle William had kept his famous recipe of sourdough pancake mix in a pitcher inside the refrigerator. Aunt Katharine never tried competing with him, either; she declared there were none better than those her beloved William made "from scratch."

Nick washed and dried his uncle's and his few dishes; then he wandered into the living room where the many windows, reaching from floor to ceiling, gave him a spectacular and breathtaking view of mountain ranges, meadows and a nearby lake with cold, sparkling-clean, blue water. Some of the best rainbow trout he had ever eaten came from the lake. It was his uncle's "store" of fresh fish, always available for any meal, whenever he chose to partake of the fish. Nick thought it was great to have such an abundant and ever-available supply simply by casting the line.

His eyes wandered to the beautiful stone fireplace in the spacious room then they came to rest on the pages of an open Bible on a nearby stand and his uncle's words shot through him again like a sharply-pointed arrow:

"Nick," he had said, "don't you think it's time -- now -- that you do something about your soul? You're not going to be here forever, you know; and once you've died, you'll not have another opportunity to prepare for what's after death. Solomon, in Ecclesiastes 11:3, tells us plainly that, where the tree falleth, there it shall be. And in the very next chapter and the first verse, he admonishes us to, 'Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them.'

"I've been praying for you for years, Nick. I want you to go to Heaven."
"I guess everybody wants to go to Heaven, Uncle Bill," the young man remembered having replied. "But I can't see any point in getting all worked up about it. I plan on giving my heart to the Lord. . . . "

"When? When, Nick? God's Word tells us, behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation. II Corinthians 6:2."

"Someday, Uncle Bill. I honestly plan to give my heart to the Lord. I'm still young; I don't see why I need to get in any big hurry over it though," he replied, feeling badly as soon as the words left his mouth. He loved his uncle; he didn't mean to hurt him.

Nick could still hear the agonized gasp of his uncle's shock. And he knew that he would never be able to get away from the look of sadness and pain he saw on the kind, sweet face and in the gentle pale blue eyes. The look did more than the soft words, even, Nick realized quickly. It cut into his heart like a sharp sword and it stretched his ordinarily shallow and light thoughts into thinking profound thoughts. Serious thoughts. The fact that age, no matter how young, was not a guarantee for living nor a for-sure deterrent against death and dying, suddenly grabbed his mind tenaciously and filled him with deep and sobering thoughts. And, too, like Uncle Bill had said, what if the Lord should come!

Nick sat down on the chair nearest him and stared vacantly into the fireplace, up and down from which flue he heard the summer breezes playing softly and randomly. What if the Lord should return? He knew where the event would leave him; knew it as surely and as certainly as he knew where he would go if he died without becoming converted and having his sins forgiven. He had gone to church with his parents all his life, and while he was never on anyone's "bad" list, and had never so much as had a "criminal" thought and was not immoral, and didn't smoke, curse, drink, swear or chew, he knew, suddenly, that all his so-called goodness and morality wouldn't suffice to give him entrance into Heaven. It certainly would not!

He got to his feet and walked outside. The sun was not yet far along on its daily round across the sky and the day was as clear and as bright and lovely as any Nick had ever seen or ever expected to see. Everything was brighter and clearer at the ranch. The air, though thin from the high altitude, was pure and fresh and clean, and the trees seemed to have a double
dwelling place -- their roots in the earth and their spires in the deep blue of the sky overhead.

He headed for the lake then stopped in awe as a moose cow and her calf crossed in front of him on her journey to the water. At the same time a herd of deer came up the slope of a meadow, grazing contentedly, flicking their tails and every now and then, sniffing the air. Had they caught his scent? he wondered, standing as still as a statue. A jack rabbit shot out from seemingly nowhere and raced like the wind downhill, followed, in hot pursuit, by a coyote; overhead, an eagle soared majestically and gracefully in the sky.

Nick jerked his head away from the deer and the moose and watched he great, magnificent bird as it soared above him -- higher and higher and still higher -- until it disappeared from his view completely, with not even a speck remaining of its flight upward.

Yes, he thought, as he recalled his uncle's words, the same thing was going to happen to those who were ready to meet the Lord. The trump of God was going to sound and the dead in Christ would rise first, then those who were ready would follow and, together, they would meet their Heavenly Bridegroom in the air, and so would they ever be with their Lord. Only their exodus from earth to Heaven would be far swifter and more speedy than the eagle's disappearance had been. Ah yes!

Nick trembled, knowing that he was not prepared for the "great and glorious event," as his uncle and others had spoken of it and phrased it, while the glory and light of Heaven seemed to radiate in them and shine through them.

Down near the lake, an elk bugled. Its bugle sent chills racing up and down the young man's spine. "The trump of God shall sound. . . . The trump of God shall sound. . . ." Get ready! Get ready! The call was clear; its message unmistakable. God was calling him -Nick -- now! He sensed the urgency of the call and the even greater urgency of obedience.

Turning, he raced back to the house and, once inside, he knelt beside a kitchen chair and prayed until he knew he was born again, washed in the Blood of Calvary's Heavenly Lamb, the Lamb of God who taketh away the sins of the world.
Not through any goodness of his own was he saved; ah, no. No! He realized now how proud he had been of his clean, moral life and how lost he'd have been, depending upon it to get him in. In a sense, that is what he had been doing, he saw now. And this in spite of the scripture's plain, "not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost;

"Which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour;

"That being justified by his grace, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life" Titus 3:5-7.

It was through the blood, nothing but the blood of Jesus, that he -- Nick -- was saved. Forgiven. The precious blood was his only plea; his salvation. It was the password and the passage into the Holy, Eternal City -- the blood of Jesus! Saved through Jesus' Blood!

Getting to his feet, Nick raced to the corral and saddled up Candy. He couldn't wait until Uncle Bill would return home; no he couldn't. He must tell him -- now. He felt his overflowing heart would burst unless he could share the glorious news with somebody. And who but Uncle Bill deserved first to hear!

Mounting Candy, he leaned into the saddle and rode away, not caring in the least that he was still a tenderfoot.