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The Inspiration Behind *Preacher on the Run*

Imagine a place where you're free to believe whatever you want—as long as it doesn't oppose the established religion. Up the street is the local clergyman's lavish property, which he can afford because you are taxed to support him. A nearby sect has bargained for special privileges to avoid the restrictions, but your own growing church has no such recourse. You want to get married, but your pastor has just been arrested for preaching without a license, plus it's illegal for a dissenting preacher to perform marriages. You'll have to hire the established clergy to officiate, but even if you wanted to pay the hefty fee, you can't—your land will be auctioned off next week if you can't pay your taxes. You've already paid those taxes once, but the sheriff insists otherwise. You don't dare go to court; everyone knows the courts are nests of extortion.

Eighteenth-century North Carolina was just such a place. The Carolinas' role in the American Revolution first drew my attention, but I found the Revolution's prequel in the decades before, when the Church of England's hierarchical system translated to secular affairs: If no one but the clergy could interpret the word of God, then no one but the government could interpret the law. The most targeted communities were the Baptists, because everything they believed directly opposed this ideology. When I began writing *Preacher on the Run*, the story of those persecuted Baptists was uppermost in my mind (and still forms the backbone of the story). But as I went on, I couldn't help thinking that it really wasn't about the Baptists at all. It was about people being hunted and harassed simply for following God as best they knew how. That could be any of us.

Freedom is risky. If you allow people to make up their own minds, they might discover you're wrong. They might find out that Jesus, not the state church, is the only way to God. They might learn that all men actually are created equal, and that they have as much right to understand the law as you do. So if you're the power-hungry type, you had better put a stop to that. Pass a riot act or two. Maybe even call out the militia, if the people need to be reminded who's in charge.

That is the setting behind *Preacher on the Run*. It's a setting that triggered all sorts of alerts in my story-loving brain. The men and women of the Regulator Uprising dreamed of a place where truth could square off with lies, where iron could sharpen iron, where tyrants didn't tell people what to believe. As Thomas Jefferson said, "It is error alone which needs the support of government. Truth can stand by itself." Or as Robert Boothe says in *Preacher on the Run*, "The truth will hold its own." If you can imagine a place like that, thank God for those who imagined it long before it ever came to be.