

Life and Sayings of Sam P. Jones:

A Minister of the Gospel

The Only Authorized and Authentic Work

By his wife
Assisted by
Rev. Walt Holcomb, a
Co-worker of Mr. Jones

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CHAPTER FIVE

HIS FIRST WORK IN THE CONFERENCE

The time between his conversion and the meeting of the annual conference was spent in earnest prayer, deep meditation and constant Bible study. Here he laid the foundation for his great ministry. He learned the secret and art of prayer. He learned the blessedness and strength of meditation. He stored his mind with God's Holy Word, and became charged with its peculiar power. His wonderful memory retained the Scriptures that he learned in those early days, which served him to his last hours. He had a wonderful knowledge of the Bible, and Scripture was ever fresh in his mind. Some of the most beautiful and striking illustrations that Mr. Jones used in his preaching were taken from the Bible. His delineations of Bible characters were the most effective of any illustrations he used.

His consecration was deepened day by day, and he was so happy at the thought of preaching that he lost sight of everything else. While I was happy because of his conversion, and his friends were delighted at the stand that he had taken, it was not clear in my mind that it was the best thing for him to join the conference and take up the regular work of the ministry. I was anxious for him to be a local preacher, but was slow in giving my consent for him to enter the itinerancy. However, God saw differently, and following the leadings of the Holy Spirit, Mr. Jones arranged to go to Atlanta in the fall of 1872 and join the North Georgia Annual Conference.

He frequently related a little experience we had when I opposed his joining the conference. He said:

"I was called to preach the week I was converted. I made up my mind at once, and I went to my wife and told her I was going to join the North Georgia Conference; and she said: 'Look here, Mr. Jones, when I married you I married a lawyer, and I'll never be an itinerant Methodist preacher's wife in this world, never! So, if you join the North Georgia Conference, you'll go without me.'

‘But, wife,’ I said, ‘the Lord has called me to preach the gospel, and he’ll remove obstacles from my way.’ ‘Well,’ said she, ‘He’ll have to remove me, then.’

“That looked pretty hard, now didn’t it? But I had my mind made up; I did not have any trouble about that. I just said, I’ll join the North Georgia Conference, and preach in it, if my wife never speaks to me again. I thought maybe she’d change her mind; but, bless your life, she grew firmer; and the time for the conference approached, and she didn’t relent. At last, the night before I was to leave home came, my wife and I talked long and earnestly; and finally she said, ‘Husband, as sure as you take the train for Atlanta in the morning, I’ll take the northbound train for my father’s.’

And I said, ‘Wife, my mind is made up, and I’ll join the conference and preach the gospel if I have to go traveling about all over the country a grass widower.’

“Well, I was a good while getting to sleep that night, but I went to sleep after awhile; and sometime in the night my wife called me, and she was suffering. I don’t know what was the matter with her. I got up and gave her something and she got better. In the morning at six wife waked me, standing by the bed with the lamp, and said: ‘Husband, get up and get ready; train will soon be here.’

And I looked in her face and said: ‘Wife, what’s come over the spirit of your dreams? What does this mean?’

She said, ‘Never mind, you get up and get ready, and I’ll tell you after awhile.’

At breakfast she said: ‘You know when I called you in the night? You remember I said that if the Lord made you an itinerant preacher, He’d have to remove me; well, just then when I called you I was in the very agonies of death, and I just cried out, ‘Lord, save my life and I’ll make the very best itinerant preacher’s wife I can.’ And she’s done it, too; every bit of it, for thirteen years now.”

In making preparation for the examination of applicants for membership in the conference, Mr. Jones pursued the course of study prescribed by the bishops of the M. E. Church, South, Rev. Geo. R. Cramer was his pastor and spiritual instructor at that time. He assisted him very much in preparing for the examination.

When the North Georgia Conference convened in Atlanta, November 27, 1872, he was received as a traveling preacher. He gave himself with all his redeemed powers to the life and work of an itinerant Methodist preacher. In making the appointments he was put down for the Van Wert circuit. This was the poorest circuit in the Conference. While there were wealthy and influential churches assigned to many of the distinguished preachers, who went away happy because of their appointments, no man left the Conference happier than Mr. Jones, and he never paused long enough to inquire about his appointment. He was one of the happiest men that ever received a circuit at the hand of a bishop. His heart fairly leaped for joy, and he shouted, “Thank God, I now have a place to work for Christ.”

Leaving conference for his home in Cartersville, in the most exuberant spirits, a good old brother came up and shook hands with him, saying: "Brother Jones, do you know what that circuit paid its pastor last year?"

He replied, "No, I had not thought of that."

"Well," said he, "it paid the preacher for his entire year's work sixty-five dollars." Mr. Jones laughed and said: "I don't care what they paid or didn't pay, I have a place to preach now, and I am going to it happy."

The circuit was located twenty-two miles from our home in Cartersville. He went down and looked over the field before taking his family. The brethren were kind in a way, and yet, as he said, "Burns was right when he wrote:

‘A man may take a neighbor's part
Yet have no cash to spare him.’”

But he was not discouraged. He had been reared in a Methodist home, and an itinerant preacher's life had been pictured to him as one of hardships and privations. There was no parsonage, and the stewards were not enthusiastic over renting and furnishing a house for him and his wife and child; and finally they suggested to him a house that might be rented, but said nothing about paying the rent, or becoming responsible for it.

Instead of following the Methodist rule to arrange for the preacher's home, they would not be responsible for it in any way. Many a minister with less courage than he possessed would have become disheartened and gone back to his profession, but instead of that he rented a house and gave his individual notes, twelve in number, each one amounting to ten dollars, to be paid monthly for the rent of the house for the coming year. The rent amounted to fifty-five dollars more than the entire salary received by the preacher the previous year. Two weeks later he moved his family to this house, in the town of old Van Wert.

While Mr. Jones had a good law library, his ministerial library was very small. He had just three books as he entered upon his first appointment. One of them was the Bible — this was the dearest of them all. No man ever loved the Old Book more than he. In one of the last sermons that he preached he placed the Bible to his heart and said:

“This precious book I'd rather own
Than all the golden gems
That e'er in monarchs' coffers shone.
Or on their diadems.

“And were the seas one Chrysolite,
This earth a golden ball;

And gems were all the stars of night,
This book were worth them all.

“Ah, no, the soul ne’er found relief
In glittering hoards of wealth;
Gems dazzle not the eye of grief,
Gold can not purchase health.

But here a blessed balm appears,
For every human woe;
And they that seek this book in tears
Their tears shall cease to flow.”

Holy Book, and all that they care for is to criticize and ridicule its precious teachings; but, oh, I love it, and I want you all to love it. Yes, I do love it, and it makes my heart fairly shout with gladness to think that my darling mother loved it, too, and pressed it to her bosom, saying:

“Holy Bible, book divine.
Precious treasure, thou art mine.”

“This old book that has lain on your table all your lives; that has been in your pathway; that is a part of your household, is filled with the wisdom of God. Oh, this blessed Book and its blessed consolation.”

Another was the fifth volume of Spurgeon’s sermons. This he read and reread until his soul was stirred with the spirit of the great English preacher. He always claimed that he owed much to that volume. He would frequently read one of Spurgeon’s texts and see how he treated it, and then would ask how he should treat his.

The other book was a volume of Skeletons of Sermons. Someone is always ready to hand such a volume to young preachers. Some young preachers have been able to use the skeletons, but these did not appeal to Mr. Jones. No one while listening to him preach would believe that such a volume had made much impression upon his mind. Not for a moment did he ever follow such plans in his sermonizing. His sermons were built and constructed very much like his mind. He spoke out of the fullness of his intellect and heart, and his style of sermon making was always peculiar to himself.

Mr. Jones began his ministry as an exhorter in his grandfather’s meetings, and some of his sermons for the first few years of his ministry were nothing more than earnest exhortations, but whether he preached or exhorted, he was always in earnest, and the people were profoundly impressed with what he said. He firmly believed that poor sermons and earnest exhortations, with the spirit of sympathy and zeal behind them, were more healthful and fruitful than the most powerful logic and finished rhetoric without the spirit of earnestness.

He said, "Earnestness cannot be feigned. It is just like the natural and healthful glow on a maiden's cheek compared to the artificial coloring. Earnestness can always be distinguished from emotional gush or bellowing hurrah-ism. Earnestness is a thing of the eye and face more than of the voice or the words."

Among the greatest compliments ever paid him, and one of those that pleased him the most, was that when people would say, "Let us go and hear him; he is in earnest; he is an earnest preacher."

The greatest compliment, and the one that he appreciated the most, was that of a little boy on this first circuit. He was just finishing up the year's work, and was getting ready to go to conference. The little boy said to his father: "I want Brother Jones to come back to our church. I can understand everything that he preaches."

To him simplicity and earnestness were two of the most commendable elements in a minister of the gospel. With Mr. Jones a multitude of other faults would be overlooked if he saw the minister was plain and simple in his preaching, and had his heart in what he was saying.

With him the earnestness of the pulpit was born of his experience of conscious pardon and complete deliverance from sin. The gospel had done so much for him that he saw what it could do for others, and led him to press the gospel claims with pleading tones upon the consciences of those who heard him. There are many men who preach the truth, but they lack the earnestness which helped to give his messages such efficiency.

At the time of his entering the ministry the devil had not only bankrupted him morally, but financially. The money he had made in the practice of law had been squandered through dissipation. Everything that he had in Cartersville that would bring any money he sold and paid his debts as far as possible.

In speaking of those trying days he said: "When I first started to preaching I had a wife and one child, a bobtail pony and eight dollars in cash.

[In after-years, when urging the ministers to tell the people the whole truth, regardless of who it hurt, he said: "Why, what can they do to you Methodist ministers, anyway? Nothing but move you, and it's no trouble for a Methodist preacher to move. All he has to do is to pack his blacking-brush and call his dog."]

Besides this, I was several hundred dollars in debt. I worked on as hard as a man could, my good wife ever at my side helping me I would work on the farm when I was not preaching and make a few bales of cotton, carry them to town, sell them, and apply the money on my debts. I could hear people say: 'Well, I like Jones, but somehow he don't pay his debts,' and they kept at me in this way until I was nearly crazy. During all this time, I was working myself to death almost, and paying a few dollars at a time on what I owed, until at last I paid it dollar for dollar. How the unkind and uncharitable remarks did sting me to the quick. Whatever people do, they ought never to say anything bad about a man when he is trying his level best to do right.

My wife's health was completely broken down by the hard work of those years, when I was struggling to get a foothold in the world. However, I paid the last dollar, and I lived to see the day when I endorsed notes for those who used to 'cuss' me for not paying my debts, and when they fell down on me, I walked up and paid their debts like a little man. The meanest men in this world are those old money-sharks who get a man in their power, push him to the wall, and then squeeze him to death."

He entered upon his work with a strong faith in God and in his people, believing that if he would do his duty he should not want any good thing. He made his first round of the circuit; returning home he was very much pleased with the prospect and the progress of his work. The people opened their eyes when they heard their new preacher, and immediately fell in love with him. After they thoroughly understood Mr. Jones, and his work began to prosper, they were unusually kind to me, and those first years were very blessed ones in many respects.

The congregations increased wherever he preached. New life and zeal entered into the services, and the old circuit took on new life. The churches were greatly revived; the backsliders were reclaimed and sinners converted at the regular services. Finally, great revivals broke out all over the charge, and each church was visited by a gracious awakening.

His compensation for his first year amounted to seven hundred dollars; six hundred and thirty-five dollars more than they paid the previous year. They requested that he be returned to them, and he spent three very profitable years on that circuit, the salary for the three years' work being two thousand one hundred dollars. This was not all in money, but a great deal of it was in corn, wheat, hay, and fodder. Some of it was paid in meat, chickens, eggs, and butter.

In his early ministry he was thrown with his people a great deal, and his keen insight into human nature and his close observation of every-day life revealed a great many shams and frauds to him.

He always had an inborn, constitutional hatred for shams, and especially religious shams. Life and truth were absolutely real to him. Heaven and hell were realities, and he didn't see how a man could be a fraud or a hypocrite without first getting out of line with God and truth, and that the devil would make real fiends of religious frauds before he would receive them. He had such a high sense of honor he could not help from having intense hatred for shams and pretense. He was compelled to strike a terrific blow which would reduce them to atoms.

He never feared higher criticism and infidelity in a theoretical sense, but was afraid of practical infidelity, as he saw it lived and practiced by his church members. He used to say he would rather be Bob Ingersoll and disbelieve the Bible than to be a professing Christian believing everything, and living just like Ingersoll. After he thoroughly understood his people, he was seized with the conviction that there were either two kinds of Christianity, or else the majority of his people had religion, and that he did not have it, or, he had it and they didn't. In his own heart since God saved him, there had been no room for prayerlessness and indifference towards God's work, yet he found his people indifferent, careless, and prayerless. These were perplexing problems to him, and he spent hours in prayer and meditation, trying to decide his duty towards his people.

The struggle that was going on in his heart was whether he should preach to his people just as he thought about them. Finally, he decided to do that, and with a matchless courage he talked to them about their inconsistencies.

His courage and earnestness gave him wonderful power over the situation. Mr. Jones not only had the courage of his convictions, but he had the courage to have convictions. So many men fail to have the courage to have convictions. This he settled once for all while studying his people. It was no wonder that such apostolic results followed his preaching on his first circuit.

Mr. Jones's style of preaching on his first circuit was characteristic of his preaching until the day of his death. Some of his greatest sermons were made the first few years he preached. Perhaps, his greatest sermon was from the text, "**What I have written, I have written**" (John 19:22). His subject being: "Conscience, Record, and God."

While he gathered a great many new illustrations from his travels and picked up incidents in his meetings that took the place of some illustrations of those earliest sermons, still, the outline of the sermon was changed very little. He always had results from his preaching. Usually, people were converted and joined the church in great numbers, but if he went to his appointment and no one was converted and came into the church in the usual way, he decided that his members were not living right, as he believed conversions would follow when the church was living up to its privilege.

Therefore, at times, instead of opening the "front doors" of the church, as he expressed it, he would open the "back doors," and ask those who were unwilling to live up to the rules and regulations of the church to come forward, and have their names erased from the roll, and retire through the "back doors" of the church. This unique way of dealing with his members frequently brought them to themselves, and resulted in their consecration and future activity. He was always equal to the emergency from the very beginning of his work as a minister.

His support at times was irregular on his first circuit. When the stewards failed to bring around the quarterage, and the provisions gave out, and feed for his horse was exhausted, he would hitch up his horse, and take me and the children and go to the home of some of our members and spend a day with them. On one occasion he went to the home of a leading member, and sent us in with the lady of the house, while hitching his horse. When asked if the head of the family was at home, he was told that he had gone away for the day, and perhaps would not return before night.

"Well," replied Mr. Jones, "that's all right, as we shall spend a day or two with you; he will return before we leave, and we will get to see him. We have decided as we cannot get our grub raw, that we will take it cooked, and will spend some time at your home."

At another time when the provisions had been exhausted, and I was in the kitchen wondering where our next meal would come from, he was at the woodpile chopping the stove wood, and whistling, and when I went out on the back porch and said, "Husband, what's the use of cutting the wood when there is nothing to cook?"

He replied, "Well, wife, the Lord will provide."

It wasn't long then until a wagon stopped in front of the parsonage loaded down with provisions, and when they were brought in, we had as much, if not more, than our home had ever had before. His faith in God to supply our physical necessities never wavered in our direst poverty.

On his first circuit, there was a very amusing incident happened. One of our wealthiest members was taken seriously ill, and thought that he was going to die. He sent for his pastor to come around and pray with him. Mr. Jones called upon him, and when entering the sick-chamber, the member said, "I have sent for you to pray for me."

"Well," said Mr. Jones, "I don't see any good reason for asking the Lord to heal you. If you can tell me any reason why you should live, I'll pray for you; so far as I know, you have never done anything for the Lord that I can stand upon, while praying. You have paid absolutely nothing to the assessments of the church; none of the missionary money for home or foreign cause has been paid by you; the stewards can't get anything out of you towards my salary; wife, children and myself have needed the necessities of life, and my horse has had nothing much to eat, and you have an abundance of everything here in your home, and feed in your barn, and could have helped us; therefore, I don't see anything to stand upon. There is no use in my asking God to restore you; I can ask Him to forgive and save you, and take you to heaven; but, there is no reason why I should ask Him to preserve your life; as you are absolutely worthless to the cause."

"Well," he replied, "you are right. There is no reason why I should live, but I will make you a promise if you can stand upon that."

"Very well," replied Mr. Jones, "what is the promise?"

He said, "I will see that my assessment is paid in full, and that you have the things that you need for your table and horse."

Mr. Jones knelt down and told the Lord about the man's promise, saying in his prayer: "Lord, you know all about him; he may deceive me, but he can't deceive you, and if he is going to change his way, stand by your work, forgive him, heal him, and save him."

It wasn't long until the man fully recovered, and one day a wagon turned into the street just in sight of the parsonage. A crowd of men sitting on the front porch of the store, in the town, said: "Whose team is that?" Some one answered, "That's Mr. ___; he is sending a load of corn to the parsonage." Another one remarked: "Mr. ___ will have to get nearer the other world than he was, before he would turn loose a load of corn to the preacher."

A colored man was hailed by one of them, who asked:

"Whose team is that?" The old negro said: "That's Mr. ___."

"Where is that load of corn going?" The old man replied, "To preacher Jones."

“How much does Mr. ___ get for that corn?”

The old colored man said, “Why, God bless you, boss, Mr. ___ has done give that corn to that preacher.”

The brother had paid his vow, and was one of Mr. Jones’s warmest friends and supporters during his stay on that circuit.

Perhaps as a summary of the results of those years on his first circuit, and the general impression made upon everyone has been told as fully by a minister who was on the adjoining circuit and who followed Mr. Jones on the Van Wert circuit. Rev. J. W. Lee, D.D., now pastor of Trinity church, Atlanta, Ga., says:

“The first circuit to which I was sent after joining the conference in the fall of 1874 was the Floyd, adjoining the Van Wert. During the year 1875 I saw a great deal of Sam Jones. In 1876 I succeeded him on the Van Wert circuit, and there I heard more of him than of any preacher, I have ever followed since. Everyone had something wonderful to relate either about his sermons or about himself. The Van Wert circuit was made up of five churches, and these were in parts of four counties, Polk, Bartow, Paulding and Floyd.

“From all I could hear this entire territory was in a state of constant excitement throughout the three years Sam Jones served. He was just as bright and as full of life then as he was afterward known by the whole country to be. Think of Sam Jones confined to sections of four counties with fire and force and overflowing humor enough to fill the whole United States. People will not be surprised, when they think of this, that his ministry was the theme of conversation in every home in my circuit. He had magnetized everybody. Baptists, Presbyterians, as well as Methodists, grew eloquent when they began to talk about Sam Jones.

“If I could put down in black and white all I heard of him on the Van Wert circuit in 1876, the record would make several books. He touched the people not only from the pulpit, from the home, and on the street, but wherever he met them. Every man, woman, and child was made the subject of his humor. He saw something ridiculous in every situation. From the time he entered a home until he left it, the whole house was kept in an uproar. No one could escape the lightning flashes of his kindly wit. Even the old grandmother in the corner, too feeble to get about, found herself laughing at herself, as Sam Jones pointed out something absurd or droll in the connection with her attempt to look younger than she really was or something else about herself she had never heard of or dreamed of before. The head of the house was represented before his wife and children in a way to make the whole family shake with laughter. Then, after he had paid his respects to the father, he would take the mother as a subject, and then one child after another clear down to the baby in arms. All this running fire of fun was continued in the midst of cross turns about duty to God, and religion, that made every member of the household cry when he was not almost splitting his sides with laughter.”

It is very evident from the words of Dr. Lee that Mr. Jones possessed in the beginning of his ministry the peculiarities and qualities that were developed, in the highest sense, the longer he lived, making him the most unique and marvelous evangelist that the world has ever known.

He began to be the talk of the ministry, and there was no little jealousy aroused in the hearts of some of his brother ministers.

However, he went about his own business and was always too magnanimous to entertain an envious or jealous thought of a brother minister, but the good and faithful preachers detected this in others, and one of them under the title of “A Glaring Fault of Good Men” wrote the following letter to the *Advocate* regarding Methodist preachers. Mr. Jones is referred to in the letter as “Brother A.,” “who gave us a fine sermon, but borrowed it from Spurgeon”:

“Four years of intimate association with itinerant Methodist preachers have convinced me that for sociability, brotherly kindness, and true manhood, to say nothing of the deep piety, earnest lives and faithful work, which make many of them moral heroes — indeed, they have no superiors on earth; yet some of us are possessed of an unhappy disposition, the moral aspect of which is bad enough: A disposition to criticize each other unjustly.

“At a camp-meeting where many preachers were present and did faithful work for the Master, Mr. Jones was complimented more highly than the others. At the close of the meeting the brethren went to the railroad station, and there discussed the success of the meeting and the merits of the sermons preached. One said: “We had some good preaching. Brother A.” (referring to Mr. Jones) “gave us a fine sermon, but he borrowed from Spurgeon.”

From his earliest ministry he always, to a certain extent, aroused the jealousies of some of his brother ministers, and encountered opposition wherever he went. I never saw him, a single moment, when he was jealous of another man’s success; but it always rejoiced his heart to see a brother minister succeed. He believed that it was a sure test of a man’s sincerity and religion to be able to rejoice at the prosperity of the Lord’s work in the hands of another.

He so frequently said: “If the Presbyterians have a good meeting, the Baptists will attend, take a back seat, look on, and reply, ‘The thing is too stiff, formal, and cold. The people are not being converted — merely joining the church.’ The Presbyterians attend a meeting conducted by the Methodists, and you ask them if the Methodists haven’t a big meeting going on; they answer, ‘Well, they are making a great deal of fuss around there — it’s all excitement, however, and soon will blow over — very little in it; however, they’ve got quite a stir among them.’ Then the Methodists would attend a revival at the Baptist church, go late and take no part, and, when the people were converted, you ask a Methodist if the Baptists weren’t having a big meeting, and he would reply, ‘Well, it’s mostly water — just talking water, water.’ So you see,” he would say, “it takes a lot of religion for a fellow to shout at another preacher’s meeting.”

His soul was so free from such petty jealousy that he couldn’t understand it in other people. However, he never bore any ill will towards those that were envious and jealous of him, but was always willing to befriend them and help them in any way.

Mr. Jones completed the course of study and was elected a deacon in December, 1874, and admitted into full connection at the annual conference, which met at our town, Cartersville. Bishop W. M. Wightman ordained him to this office.

The first three years in the ministry spent on the Van Wert circuit were among the most successful years of his life. While they did not afford the larger opportunities of later years, nevertheless, the work accomplished there was marvelous in its scope.

They were, indeed, strenuous years, as he preached almost constantly, and must have delivered on an average of four hundred sermons a year.

They were gracious years, in that he saw wonderful revivals, great increase in church membership, and the family altar erected in the homes of many of his leading members. Perhaps, the aggregate increase of membership on the circuit was not less than two hundred accessions each year, making in all five or six hundred people who joined the churches on his first circuit.

The friendship formed and the mutual love of the pastor and people became stronger as the years went by, and some of his warmest and staunchest friends are those who survive him on that circuit. The devotion of the people to their pastor was something remarkable, and Mr. Jones's great interest and love for them increased year by year. He was of such a genial and social nature that he made friends wherever he went, and it seemed to me that this people loved him with a devotion as I have never known other men to be loved.

These were three years of work and happiness and blessings in our own lives. He not only blessed others, but in turn we received great personal blessings ourselves. It was during the first year on the Van Wert circuit that I, without even a solicitation from my husband, made up my mind to go into his church with him, I having been a member of the Baptist church. This was a glad surprise for him, but I have always felt that it was a source of strength. Some of the happiest days of my life were spent with those noble people, and the memory of them will ever be sweet.

~ end of chapter 5 ~

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