

## ELDER JACOB KNAPP

Elder Jacob Knapp, the famous evangelist, was so endued with power from on high that his name at one time was almost a synonym for spiritual power. So many people professed conversion in his meetings that he finally lost count of them, and he gave up the effort after he passed the hundred thousand mark.

Elder Knapp was a pioneer in evangelistic work. He was probably the first man, at least in the Northern part of the United States, to devote his entire time to evangelistic work. There were few evangelists in those days. This important New Testament office was well nigh neglected. This was no doubt partly owing to the prevalence of Old School Calvinism. Calvinists of the Old School believed that God would save His own elect in His own way and in His own time, without the urgent appeals of evangelists. They were afraid that evangelists would persuade those who were not God's elect to make a profession of religion. Many would not even pray for the salvation of their own children for fear that they might not be among God's elect. This belief has been one of the greatest, if not the greatest, of all hindrances to evangelistic work. The labors of Wesley, and of the great evangelists, Finney and Moody, did much to overthrow this fatalistic belief. But Elder Knapp met with much opposition from his well-meaning but deluded hyper-Calvanistic brethren and yet his labors were so richly blessed of God that great multitudes were converted to Christ under his ministry.

Jacob Knapp was born in the State of New York, Dec. 7<sup>th</sup> 1779' His parents were in moderate circumstances. They were Episcopalians, and Knapp was brought up to attend church and was taught the Creed and Catechism from his infancy. "My mind" says he, "was early, and at times, deeply impressed with divine truth. From the first of my remembrance I had seasons of secret prayer, and of deep anxiety about the future welfare of my soul; but I was not led to hope in Christ until the summer of my seventeenth year, when it pleased God to take from me my dear mother."

The death of his mother made a deep impression upon him and drove him to prayer, studying his Bible, and to the house of God, with more earnestness than he had ever felt before. He was under so deep conviction of sin that he could find no rest of soul. "I often repaired to the bam or grove in the silent hours of the night, and poured out my soul in prayer to God," says he. He was so distressed about his soul that his health began to decline. "At length," says he, "one Lord's day morning, I took my Bible and hymn-book, and repaired to the woods, with a determination never to return without relief to my soul. I went some distance from human sight or hearing, laid myself down on a grassy knoll, and prayed and read, and read and prayed." He prayed earnestly and suffered much agony of soul. "But," says he, "to the joy and rapture of my soul, after a short space of time passed in this condition, my load of guilt was gone." I rose up quickly, turned my eyes toward heaven, and thought I saw Jesus descending with His arms extended for my reception. My soul leaped within me, and I broke forth into singing praises to the blessed Saviour. The sweet melodies of the birds seemed to make harmony with the songs, and, as I looked around, the sun shone with a lustre not its own, majestic trees, swaying to the gentle breeze, appeared to bow in sweet submission to the will of heaven. All naturere smiled, and everything, animate and inanimate, praised God with a voice (though unheard before) too loud too plain to be misunderstood."

Even after so bright a conversion, Knapp relapsed into back-slidden state, after ten months or a year, and became so wicked as to make sport of religion. But conviction of sin often pierced his heart like a dagger and he often had great compunctions of conscience. Finally he promised to attend a dance. There was a prayer-meeting in the Baptist Church on the same night. He became overwhelmed with the thought of his sinfulness that he went to the prayer-meeting instead of to the dance, and there, within hearing of the dancing music, he and several companions wept and prayed their way back to God. This was the means of bringing about a revival in the place, and sixty of the young people were led to Christ. Knapp was then baptized and united with the Baptist Church, and soon became an earnest worker for the salvation of souls. He organized prayer-meetings in the neighborhood of his home, and a number of souls were won to Christ.

When he was about twenty years of age, his father wanted to give him a farm and means to start life for himself, but Jacob had great desires and ambitions for an education. He felt that God was calling him to the work of the ministry. By doing chores and working hard during vacation, and after many severe trials from poverty and ignorance he at last managed to obtain a fair education. He had prayed much in secret that God would discipline his mind and provide for his daily needs. During this time he had led the meetings in a Baptist Church which had no pastor. In about two months nearly all the young people were led to God.

For some time Knapp taught school, and held many meetings in school-houses and other places. Although he did not pretend to preach regular sermons, many souls were won to Christ through his labors. Yet he felt so keenly his inability to preach that he decided to abandon the idea. But "trouble rolled in like a flood" until he felt driven to request his church to give him a license to preach. He preached his trial sermon and was licensed to preach in 1822, when twenty-three years of age. He then spent some time in theological training at Hamilton University, which had just been founded. While there he preached in a number of places, but through trying to preach in a manner to please men and not to give offence, he lost much of his joy and power.

In 1825 he received his diploma and became pastor of a church at Springfield, New York, where he remained as pastor for five years. About sixty persons professed conversion to Christ in his church during this time. He then became pastor of a church at Watertown, New York. Here he remained for about three years, and although the church was small and poor, he baptized about two hundred converts during that time.

In 1833 Knapp felt a definite call to the evangelistic work. Many of his Calvinistic brethren were bitterly opposed to his engaging in work of this kind, as they did not believe in revival meetings. He began to hold protracted meetings, however, and many souls were brought to a decision for Christ in these meetings.

"At length I was advised by Dr. Nathaniel Kendrick," says he, "to take an appointment from the Board of the Baptist Convention of the State of New York, as an evangelist in Jefferson and Oswego Counties. I thought favorably of this suggestion, imagining that such an appointment would increase my influence and tend to silence my opposers. I therefore went to the meeting of the Convention, about a hundred and forty miles distant. I had not mingled with the brethren long before I found that some, whom I had counted as friends, were disposed to treat me with coolness. Though endorsed by such a man as Dr. Kendrick whose weight of personal influence was everywhere recognized, yet my application was instantly met by a decided opposition. One must tell what he had heard, another explain his views of the gospel method, until, after a lengthy debate, in which some cried one thing and some another, it was

resolved to refer the question of my appointment to a committee. This committee made an adverse report, and my application was rejected. Overwhelmed with grief and mortification, I started to fill an engagement to preach in Loraine, a distance of about one hundred and fifty miles. The Lord brought me safely on my way some fifty miles, when my horse sickened and died. I got a brother to take me to Oswego, and then I went on board a boat for Sackett's Harbor. Shortly after we had started, 'there arose a mighty tempest, and, for a while there appeared but little chance for any of our lives. But my own spirits were so depressed that I seemed to have but little choice between life and death. I thought myself in perils by sea, in perils by land, and in perils by false brethren.' But God preserved me for greater joys and greater sorrows than any I had hitherto experienced.

"For a short time the effect of my rejection by the Board of the Convention was very disheartening. I had hoped to secure, by an appointment, a greater influence among the churches, the more positive countenance of some of the ministers who had hitherto been sitting on the fence, hesitating as to which side to get down on and also to silence the active opposition of those who had avowed their hostility to my course; but it was not long before I found that my difficulties in these directions were on the increase. The non-committal became outspoken against me, and those heretofore opposed became violent and abusive. My soul was in deep trouble and I knew not which way to turn.

"But in my distress I cast my burdens on the Lord. I sought to know the will of God. I cried unto the Lord; and, blessed be His name, very soon He made known His ways, and lifted upon me the light of His countenance. After spending one whole day in fasting and prayer, and continuing my fast until midnight, the place where I was staying was filled with the manifested glory of God. His presence appeared to me, not exactly in visible form, but as really to my recognition as though He had come in person, and a voice seemed to say to me, 'Hast thou ever lacked a field in which to labor?' I answered, 'Not a day.' 'Have I not sustained thee, and blessed thy labors?' I answered, 'Yea, Lord.' 'Then learn that henceforth thou art not dependent on thy brethren, but on me. Have no concern but to go on in thy work. My grace shall be sufficient for thee.'

"From that night I felt willing to sacrifice the good opinion of my brethren, as I had previously sacrificed the favor of the world, and swing off from all dependencies but God. Up to this time I had concerned myself too much about the opinions of other and older brethren, distrusting my youth and inexperience. But the Lord taught me that He was my only and infallible guide. I joyously acquiesced in His will, and from that day to this have rested in His divine manifestation. Ah! how reluctant we are to cleave to the Lord! How prone to cling to creature dependencies. Since I have endeavored to seek divine direction as to all my fields of labor, I have learned that it is possible for me, generally, to gain as dear impressions of the will of God concerning my duty as though it was announced in audible tones.

"In the manifestation of God's presence to me, He cast no reflections on those of my ministerial brethren who differed from me, but, in the most tender manner, bade me to leave them to pursue their own way, and cleave only to Him. Thus was I cured of all yearning for denominational promotion, led to make an unreserved consecration of all my powers to one end, — the conversion of men to Christ; and made willing to labor on, through evil and good report, leaving my vindication until the day of judgment.

"A year did not elapse before I saw plainly that God's plan was much better than mine. I found it far more delightful and profitable to my soul to be directed by God's providence, where, and by His Spirit, how to labor, than to be prescribed in my field, and dictated to as to how to conduct my ministry, by others. The Lord carried me from place to place, even where I had the least expectation of going. In my perplexities, I was driven to God in prayer for Him to direct my steps, and mark out every inch of my

path. And I have been led to understand since, that had not the furnace been heated seven times hotter than it was wont to be, the dross would never have been separated from the gold. My kind and heavenly Father did not give me one blow that was not needful, nor one thorn that was not required to keep me from being exalted above measure, through the abundance of my success in winning souls, and the many flattering expressions of those who sympathized with my work."

After making the full consecration and obtaining the deeper experience described above, Knapp began to win multitudes to Christ Thousands upon thousands professed conversion in his meetings, and many sought and obtained the filling of the Holy Spirit So great was his power in preaching the gospel, it has been said that wherever he went "infidelity turned pale, and Universalism gave up the ghost." "These were golden days, sunny spots, heavenly seasons. The memory of them is precious," says Knapp.

So exhaustive were his labors, many wondered how he could perform them. But after his hard day's labor in meetings he often felt as nimble as a deer. "It is really surprising," says he, "what a small amount of sleep and food we can get along with, and how much we can endure, when we are filled with the Spirit. Machinery well oiled can be run day and night for years together with but little friction."

In many places where Knapp labored, business was suspended and meetings were held three times a day and frequently all night. Farmers took their wagons through their neighborhoods and brought the people to the meetings. The crowds were often so great that Christians stayed away from the meetings to make room for the unsaved, and spent the time of service in prayer at their homes.

At one place where Knapp held meetings, there was so much praying that a skeptical physician in the place became so uneasy that he sold his property at a great sacrifice and went to Canada. He said that "he could not go to his barn but someone was praying in the hay-mow; he could not go to the woods, but someone was praying behind every bush-heap; that the women pestered the life out of him, tormenting him with their religion, so that he would rather live in purgatory."

At Hannibal Center, New York, the church where Knapp held meetings was very dead, the weather dismal, and everything seemed unfavorable. But the power of God finally fell and scores were converted. At Auburn, New York, when Knapp was holding meetings there, some of the rowdies tried to create a disturbance one day. "On the same night some of them came into the meeting, were smitten down by the power of God's truth, and had to be carried to their homes." At Utica, New York, more than eight hundred persons professed conversion during the revival. About ten thousand professed conversion to Christ as a result of Knapp's first series of meetings in Baltimore, Maryland.

In 1841, when Knapp held revival services in Boston, "the Spirit of God," says he, "was poured out on the whole city, and all the people seemed to be affected by His presence." Rev. J. D. Fulton says: "The attendance upon theatres waned, that upon churches increased." At Lowell, Massachusetts, in 1841, "The Lord came down in power, and the work rolled on mightily." One of the large cotton mills had to be stopped on account of the operatives being under too great conviction of sin to continue their work. About fifteen hundred persons professed conversion to Christ as a result of Knapp's labors in that place. When he left, "the air resounded with the songs of the rejoicing and weeping multitudes."

The whole city of Salem, Massachusetts, was shaken by the power of God in 1843, when Knapp held revival services there. His friends chartered a train of cars and accompanied him to Boston.

In 1860, Knapp again held meetings in Boston, and much prayer was made for an outpouring of the Spirit, and "the very atmosphere seemed impregnated with the divine influence. No one could come into the room where we were without recognizing the presence of God" says Knapp. "At times it seemed as if I was overwhelmed with the gracious fulness of God, and that my poor and limited faculties could bear no more."

We have given only a few of the most striking incidents connected with the meetings of Elder Knapp. Almost everywhere he went the people were so aroused and concerned about the salvation of their souls that some complained of the excitement in the meetings. But Knapp did not see why they should not become excited about religious matters as about matters of far less importance, such as business, games, politics, and so on. "For my own part," says he, "I never could see why men might properly become excited on other subjects, but must invariably approach the momentous subject of salvation with all the proprieties of an imperturbable deliberation. It seemed to me that the record of the Acts of the Apostles was a history of excitements, under which the world was verily turned upside down."