



Jarena Lee

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Preaching Freedom from Sin and Slavery
by Patricia Merritt

"I have recorded how the Lord called me to his work, and how he has kept me from falling from grace, as I feared I should. In all things he has proved himself a God of truth to me."

At one time in America, it was dangerous for a female to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It was also not popular for anyone to condemn slavery. But one African-American woman did both—and more.

Jarena Lee was the first official female preacher in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Lee traveled across the country and into Canada preaching against sin and slavery. Lee was also the first black American to have an autobiography published in the United States.

Much of what we know about Lee comes from her own autobiography, *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee*, and its expanded version, *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee*. These autobiographical stories, taken from the journals that Lee kept beginning as a girl and throughout her life, tell us she had only three months of formal education and describe her conversion and her travels preaching.

Lee was born February 11, 1783, to free parents in Cape May, New Jersey. She was separated from her parents at the age of seven and worked as a servant for a white family about 60 miles from her home.

At an early age, Lee said the Lord began to deal with her about her sins. She writes: ". . . the Spirit of God moved in power through my conscience, and told me I was a wretched sinner. On this account so great was the impression, and so strong were the feelings of guilt that I promised in my heart that I would not tell another lie. But notwithstanding this promise my heart grew harder, after a while, yet the Spirit of the Lord never entirely forsook me, but continued mercifully striving with me, until his gracious power converted my soul."

Lee's first account of attending a church service was in 1804. The Presbyterian minister's message convicted her again of her sinful state. Lee then wrestled for a period of time with thoughts of suicide: "I was driven of Satan, in the course of a few days, and tempted to destroy myself. It was the unseen arm of God which saved me from self-murder."

However, Lee's devotion to God remained steadfast, and she continued to seek the Lord. She went to Philadelphia where she visited various church services and eventually came to know Bishop Richard Allen, founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

A few years later, Lee said the Lord called her to preach: "But to my utter surprise there seemed to sound a voice which I thought I distinctly heard, and most certainly understand, which said to me, 'Go preach the Gospel!' I immediately replied aloud, 'No one will believe me.' Again I listened, and again the same voice seemed to say—'Preach the Gospel; I will put words in your mouth.'"

Allen was one of the first people with whom Lee shared her news. The aspiring minister also made an application to preach in the AME church. However, Allen told her the Methodist church did not allow women preachers. He told Lee that she could "expound" about the Word of God but could not "preach" in the pulpit. She questioned this reasoning in one of her now famous quotes:

"O how careful ought we to be, lest through our by-laws of church government and discipline, we bring into disrepute even the word of life. For as unseemly as it may appear now-a-days

for a woman to preach, it should be remembered that nothing is impossible with God. And why should it be thought impossible, heterodox, or improper for a woman to preach? seeing the Saviour died for the woman as well as for the man.

"If the man may preach, because the Saviour died for him, why not the woman? seeing he died for her also. Is he not a whole Saviour, instead of a half one? as those who hold it wrong for a woman to preach, would seem to make it appear. Did not Mary first preach the risen Saviour, and is not the doctrine of the resurrection the very climax of Christianity?"

But Lee put her preaching aspirations on hold and in 1811 married a Methodist minister, Joseph Lee, in Snow Hill, Pennsylvania, near Philadelphia. Their marriage was short lived—he died in about 1818, leaving Lee with two small children. It was then that she renewed her desire to preach the Gospel. She came back to Allen, who recanted his earlier prohibition and allowed Lee to preach the Gospel in the AME church.

But despite Allen's blessings, Lee continually dealt with hostility to her ministry because of her sex and race. She became a traveling minister and journeyed thousands of miles on foot. In one year, Lee reported that she traveled over 2,700 miles and preached 138 sermons.

Eventually, Allen became one of Lee's greatest admirers. The two also became close friends, with Allen arranging preaching engagements for her and taking Lee along with him to Methodist conferences. Often, however, Lee traveled across the country alone or with another woman and preached to small and large crowds of both blacks and whites. Her willingness to risk her life for the Lord illustrates her determined faith in God.

Perhaps the riskiest engagements were in Maryland, which was a slave state. The real possibility of Lee being taken into slavery did not deter her. And when slaves heard that a free black woman preacher was in the area, they also risked much to travel to hear her. Lee writes about one camp meeting where a large number of slaves walked long distances—some even up to 70 miles—to hear her preach, despite the fact they would have to walk the entire distance back at night in order to be in their slave quarters the next morning for work.

In addition to preaching men's and women's need for a Savior, Lee preached against the immorality of slavery. Slavery was a sin, she said, one she felt that God would punish.

Lee also faced ill health for much of her life, but did not let that slow her down either. Though in one account she laments of her hardships in life, she still gives praise to God. After the death of Allen, she said, "My money was gone, my health was gone, and I [was] measurably without a home. But I rested on the promises of God. 'They that put their trust in me shall never be confounded.' Without having a dollar to help myself, I saw the Lord would verify his promise, bless his name for it."

In 1833, Lee began working with an editor to turn her religious journal into an autobiography. Three years later, she had 1,000 copies of her *Religious Experience and Journal* printed and began distributing it at camp meetings, organizational meetings, and on the street. In 1839 she had another 1,000 copies printed, and in 1849, she had an expanded version printed. The last known event in her life was a visit she made to the home of Rebecca Cox Jackson, a Shaker leader, on New Year's Day in 1857. We do not know when and where she died.

Her life was one of deep conviction and faith. Lee's driving passion was to be a minister of the Gospel and bring men and women of all races to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. And because she wanted to help people long after she was gone, she left a record of her travels and the goodness of God.



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