

3. Joseph Jenkins

by Robert Ellis

Joseph Jenkins was a unique and influential preacher who was characterized by his volcanic personality, revival preaching style, and spiritual strength.

Scripture: Isaiah 6:8, Luke 15:11, Acts 9:1, 1 Corinthians 2:4, 2 Timothy 4:2

Topics: "Revival Preaching", "Spiritual Leadership"

Description

Robert Ellis reflects on the life and ministry of Joseph Jenkins, a volcanic personality in the Welsh religious landscape from 1860 to 1929. Jenkins, a preacher of tremendous force, was known for his spiritual depth and unpredictability, often described as a 'bundle of inconsistencies.' His preaching style was raw and unadorned, devoid of artifice or eloquence, yet powerful in its impact. Jenkins' influence extended beyond the pulpit, displaying pastoral care and spiritual insight in his interactions with individuals, guiding them towards repentance and salvation. His legacy as a revival preacher and profound spiritual leader during the 1904/5 revival in Wales remains a testament to his unwavering commitment to proclaiming the gospel.

Transcript

BORN 1860 at Cwmystwyth, Cardiganshire. Educated at Canton, Cardiff, Pontypridd and Trevecca College. Ordained in 1887. Ministered at the following churches: Caerphilly, Spellow Lane, Liverpool (English), Newquay, Dolgelly, Festiniog, Llandoverly. Died 1929.

1860-1929 are the temporal boundaries of this volcanic, personality. Volcanic is the only word to describe Joseph Jenkins. He can only be explained in the light of the spiritual and eternal. Faintly could the words of Young be applied to him-- "Midway from nothing to the Deity. One moment rubbing shoulders with angels, the next, creeping in the lower parts of the earth." Once we paid him a call on an afternoon preceeding his last fatal illness. There he was in his study sitting in his chair lost in melancholy. Suddenly he opened those piercing eyes and said-- "I am going to eternity. What will they do with me there--a little bundle of inconsistencies? The saints don't understand me. Seventy five per cent are powerless to do so. What will they do with me in the great beyond? One thing is certain, whatever they'll do with me, I shall never be at home with devils." There's Joseph Jenkins. His own words give the true estimate-- 'a bundle of inconsistencies.' Yes, a volcanic personality--one moment as lifeless as for long periods are Etna or Vesuvius, the next moment emitting a terrific stream of spiritual lava couched in never-to-be-forgotten phrases. There was no art in his preaching, no light and shade, no pre-meditated cadences and 'hwyl.' He was Joseph Jenkins in the pulpit as everywhere else. There was no effort to make a parade of eloquence.

If his Heavenly Father did not pronounce his Amen to his ministry, Jenkins would not play the strings to solicit the Amen from other quarters. During such a service, when the wheels were dragging heavily along, he stopped and said-- "This little lady (his sermon) is not coming, and you know it, and I know it, and my Heavenly Father knows it, Amen." Who shall forget his terrific preaching in the Association at Denbigh, April 1919? His text has taken wings but the terrific effect remains with us. Never to be forgotten were those flights in voice, thought, and imagination when describing the blasphemous daring of the Roman soldiers in their rough handling of the Son of God. In one corner of the Big Seat sat Doctor John Williams, Brynsiencyn, as limp and soaked as a wet cloth; while in the other corner was the self-possessed Doctor T. C. Williams, with tear-stained eyes and twitching lips. I sat in the gallery beside another gentleman who grasped my arm like a vice at every flight the preacher took, asking in my ear-- "What is this creature" (Be ydy'r creadur yma?).

He was never regarded as a safe preacher. It was not safe to place him in a prominent position in the hope of his making a mark. His utter disregard for everything conventional made him very unsafe as a preacher. People witnessed this during the same Association meetings. He was engaged to speak with the prominent preachers at the 10 o'clock morning service, which was then regarded as the opportune time for a preacher to make an impression. But that morning Jenkins was inaudible even to the Big Seat; everybody was disappointed and ready to suggest what a waste of good time. In the evening it was arranged for him to preach alone in another chapel while two other prominent preachers preached in the most important chapel to an over-flowing congregation. A young minister was present listening to Joseph Jenkins preaching to about three dozen people on the words of the Master-- "Will ye also go away?" The eagle preacher spread his mighty pinions and heaven honoured this servant of God by opening its doors and letting out the winds to carry the prophet and congregation to dizzy heights. The testimony of the young minister was-- "I did not sleep a wink that night."

Joseph Jenkins was the favourite preacher of that great human (yet divine) Doctor Puleston Jones. Being so devoid of art and oratorical tricks, according to Puleston, Joseph Jenkins' shout was inevitable. In giving advice to young students, Puleston remarked that he liked to hear a kettle singing before boiling, but never a preacher. Jenkins never sang. He knew nothing of 'hwyl' in the musical sense. To change the metaphor, and to use his own illustrations when describing the preaching of John Jones, Talsarn, "You read his sermons today, you are disappointed. There is nothing there. Why? He isn't there. The sermons of John Jones were nothing but mere concrete upon which the big guns were fixed, and the fire from heaven came and touched the fuse, and the result - a nation on its knees imploring mercy."

A young man (a little inebriated with his own importance) asked Joseph Jenkins--

"Would John Jones, Talsarn, be as great a preacher today as he was in his own day?" Jenkins answered him-- "Young man, if five thousand of the like of us went into the soul frame of John Jones it would be empty for eternity." Jenkins knew nothing of a musical 'hwyl' but had a terrific shout that opened secret doors, which took us into realms where we were oblivious of everything temporal. Doctor Cynddylan Jones remarked that when Edward Mathews was in the heights of his preaching he felt as if electric shocks went through him spiritually and physically. Our feeling was similar under the ministry of this eminent man of God. How true are the words of Principal T. C. Edwards-- "God's last resort is a great preacher." This man was one of the tremendous forces in the hand of God behind the 1904/5 revival. (We shall have occasion to refer to this aspect in another chapter). In a review of a book published by an author bearing the same name as Joseph Jenkins, the reviewer made this remark-- "The author is Joseph Jenkins. To Welsh Presbyterians there is only one Joseph Jenkins. He has gone to heaven, but he was

there very often whilst here in the flesh." It will be to our gain to look at Joseph Jenkins from different angles. First, let us glance at the man.

(a) Physical. --

Short of stature and dark, he had piercing eyes. When he was disturbed by the glories of the gospel or the terrors of sin, who could withstand the flame of holiness in his eyes? During the final year at Bala College he was invited to spend the week with us as students, and what a week!! Joseph Jenkins in the heights! What unforgettable phrases, as when he called our attention to the relationship of the sexes! "Don't be responsible for destroying the religious bloom of the female mind." He was introduced by the late Professor David Williams and in his opening remarks he said-- "I don't know whether you are graduates or not. If you are, make your degrees bags to carry the goods of Calvary." Our little bags were richer in their contents after a week of his reminiscences and advice. One evening during his stay we were honoured by the visit of another gentleman, the late (and sadly bereaved) Rev. George M. L.I. Davies. Never shall we forget the sight. At one end of the table Joseph Jenkins, the short Iberian. At the other end George Davies, the tall handsome Celt, (reminiscent of his eminent grand-father John Jones, Talsarn). Oh, had we the genius of a Reynolds or a Rembrandt, and could we but see that painting "on the line." in the Royal Academy! On our way home Jenkins made the remark--"Did you see that man's face, tall figure, and peaceful eyes? Why didn't the Almighty constitute me on the same lines as him, instead of giving me such an insignificant face." What would we give for one spark of the genius in that insignificant face?

(b) Intellectual. --His was a keen mind and discerning. He could weigh and measure men and situations to the finest degree. In a class he measured us all in a short period. We were very wary of our utterances in his presence. In company he once made the remark that he was not impressed by a certain person present. He had no "a priori" knowledge of the person. Jenkins was of the opinion that the best thing that person would ever accomplish would be to wear a blazer and carry a tennis racquet. This prophecy we fear has been fulfilled!! His mind was of the dramatic mould. He was the Edward Mathews of our age. The dramatic flights will remain the inspiration of many of his admirers. In a sermon emphasizing the duty of children to reciprocate the love of their parents, he gave this beautiful picture of a mother -- Young people, honour your parents. What is a mother? A drop of the divine paint that fell from the brush when the eternal artist was making a painting of his own heart. Although he was not a poet in the accredited sense of the word, yet one could see the influence of Shakespeare and Edward Young on his mind as the following verbal pictures demonstrate:

"Sinner, you don't realise now that you are an artist, but some day Time will present you with a panoramic replica of your sins; that mother who died of a broken heart years too soon; that father you drove to the cemetery; that girl you deceived; they shall be presented before your eyes in full length and their blood dripping like The drum of eternity upon your soul." Is there not an echo of Shakespeare here? Or again in his warning to young people against the sins of the flesh he said-- "See those young people dancing half naked at one o'clock in the morning when nature is at its weakest, with only one inch between them and eternity." Is not that reminiscent of Young-- "Life's little stage is a small eminence an inch high above the grave." Another turn of his mind was sarcasm, which is a very dangerous weapon yet a necessary lancet in the hand of the skilled surgeon be he in hospital or pulpit. The following is an instance of his wielding of this weapon -- "You occasionally meet a man with a soul of a fly, and the brains of a dwarf. It would be a boon and a blessing for such a man to be placed upon a pole long enough to hold him in the face of the sun, in order that he might see something big for once in a lifetime." Once an officer of the church, who was a very responsive listener, objected to a proposed increase in the minister's salary, because he didn't

know what the minister was doing with his money (he had five children). The minister was in the heights in his pulpit on a Sunday morning and the responses came like a shower. The minister stopped and said-- "Yes, you say Amen. I had that idea in a book that cost me seven and six. That's what the little man is doing with his money."

(c) Spiritual. --As regards this aspect of his character he was many-sided; moody, sensitive to atmosphere, and cautious in company. The first thing would be to send out feelers to probe the atmosphere. If it were not of the standard expected by him, he would retreat into his shell and remain there, most uncommunicative. He was definitely not a good mixer. We know of different families in the same church who entertained him. One family had no desire to see him again, and the other idolised the memory of his stay.

Personally I know in which of the two households I should like to spend the eternal years. His tendency was to be tense and grave. His friend and colleague at Trevecca College, the late Rev. J. M. Jones, M.A., Merthyr Tydfil, relates one incident manifesting the seriousness of Joseph Jenkins. During the ministry of Mr. Jones at Bwlch, Breconshire, Joseph Jenkins was invited to their anniversaries. He preached on Saturday night on Isaiah 11, 6-8, and left a deep impression. J.

M. Jones the minister asked Jenkins in a jocular mood how he managed to arrange such a menagerie. But Jenkins was in no jocular mood and not a word passed between them during the weekend. Joseph Jenkins was disappointed that his friend could entertain such a frivolous idea concerning so serious a matter. He was also of a fine spirit, full of charm. I asked him, to take part and preach in my first induction services. What wonderful days--and nights. How near he could come to a young man on the threshold of the ministry.

Three hours after supper, alone with this tremendous personality, gave me a panoramic view of his soul. Many things accounted for the tremendous influence of his personality. Undoubtedly one could see even the geographical influence of his birthplace Cwm-Ystwyth; the rugged majesty of the mountains and the mysticism of the heights were a perfect blend in him. Oh for a second of the thrill of his great sermon on "His foundation is in the holy mountains (Ei sail sydd ar y mynyddoedd sanctaidd)!"

Here are a few crumbs from the sumptuous feast; his description of the mountains of Snowdonia enveloped, in cloud, thunder and lightning, yes, and the preacher himself in the midst of the storm (he remained out all night). With what rapture he repeated the words -- "When the sun rose the following morning the mountains were still there." "The mountains alone of everything else in the world have the first breath of God's cleansing mercies." "The inhabitants of the heights always have a clean, healthy appetite."

"Mountain sheep never suffer from foot-rot." "In many parts of the country animals suffer from foot-and-mouth disease; men suffer from the same thing--drinking and dancing." Another secret of his strength was prayer. How he differed from everyone else with that tremendous familiarity with the Divine, which was so majestic and awe-inspiring! He was no stranger to the realm of prayer. His beloved wife related how she would retire at 11 o'clock and call in the study and see Joseph Jenkins on his knees by his chair.

She would get up at 6.30 the following morning and find him in the same place. One of his colleagues at Trevecca, the late Rev. William Richards, Bettws, related how the staff arranged for the students to go out and hold revival meetings in the local churches. He and Joseph Jenkins went to a certain church and were met by a handful of farm-servants who came to scoff. One went as far as to strike Jenkins. The preacher

fell on his knees and offered a prayer. Before he got up the persecutor was in tears of repentance and was seeking the way of salvation.

Another influence, which moulded his character, was the spirituality of the leaders and church of his youth--Cwm Ystwyth. How he admired those pious elders. Who listened to these words from his lips and was not thrilled? -- "Last Sunday I preached at Cwm Ystwyth. I looked down at the big seat--strange faces from one end to the other. I was tempted to shout, as I looked upon them--oh you robbers! My memory went back for fifty years and remembered the seat--a big seat in the deepest sense. Bearded saints! We knew by their gait that they were holy men, each one of them shod in eternity."

The church at Cwm-Ystwyth experienced periodical revivals during the nineteenth century. A refrigerator never produces prophets Joseph Jenkins was a revival preacher from his first going-out, and who shall deny his prominence and co-operation in the revival of 1904, which we shall elaborate in the next chapter.

What shall we say of him as a pastor? In the ordinary accepted sense of the word he was not one, but if Ian McLaren's definition of pastoral work is right, namely, "cure of souls," then Joseph Jenkins was a pastor. One of his members in his first pastorate, Caerphilly, related an experience, which proves our statement. Her father was killed in the colliery and before the corpse reached the house the young pastor was there and he fell on his knees. Oh, what an intercession followed on behalf of the widow and orphan! After forty years had passed the lady with deep emotion said-- "I even forgot that my father was killed." The effect of that prayer on us as a family that fateful day was tremendous.

Another instance will suffice. Once he was called to the bedside of a recluse who had spent such a hopeless life that nobody except the nurse and doctor darkened this door during his last illness. Joseph Jenkins accompanied by an elder, called to see him and the following conversation was heard-- "They tell me that you are lonely," and the recluse answered -- "Yes, and no." "What do you mean by yes and no!" asked the preacher. "Perhaps you will be surprised to hear that I am not altogether lonely." "What company do you get?" asked the preacher, and the recluse answered, "The company of an occasional verse and a line of a hymn I learnt before taking the prodigal pathway." "Oh," said the preacher, "you are not so lonely." Joseph Jenkins drew out the Biblical verses and hymns and centred them upon Christ and said-- "It is His fellowship you need." Then he fell on his knees and the elder related that he was not on earth for several minutes. The preacher got up and went out, and on their way they came to a little hillock. The preacher appeared to be enthralled and started shouting the verses and hymns of the prodigal, interspersed with an occasional laugh. The elder was shocked and asked the preacher if there was anything wrong with him. The preacher answered, "Didn't you see the soul of that man entering the life-boat of salvation before I got up from my knees; and he is sailing well into the harbour of mercy and love."

Listen to him at the graveside of one of his old members. He travelled from North Wales to pay his last tribute and, arriving a little late, he found that the other speakers had finished-- "Whatever you have said it wasn't half enough. Perhaps that half was twisted. There was too much buckram in this man's back to twist. He was backward in the handling of this world. I haven't seen his will, I don't know whether he left his children a penny, but remember that he left enough behind him to make their hell terrible if they will turn their back on the God of their father. Evan Davies was a stupid man. I make no apology on his graveside. He was made a pillar to God's grace. Were it not for grace, the devil would be riding him through this district. I would have given up hope for myself had I not realised the polish of grace on the character of Evan Davies. He was nasty but he has gone to Heaven. It was not nature that promoted him there. It is all

of grace from top to bottom and, if the grace of God could save such a creature, he can save a creature like me. You merely talk in a church meeting, but he related his experience, and at the grave-side I thank thee Evan Davies for driving thy fear through the heart of a young preacher."

In, through, and above everything Joseph Jenkins was a preacher. The pulpit was his throne. As a preacher he had a firm grasp on the eternal verities. They also grasped him. He not only handled the gospel but the gospel handled him. He knew the inner meaning of Paul's words-- "Knowing the terror of the Lord." Although preaching was his sole passion he was afraid of the pulpit. When addressing a number of students who had a common tendency to blame the churches for not giving them engagements he asked them if they knew anything of the fear of preaching-- "I have sent a telegram away on Saturday morning to cancel anniversary services 'sorry cannot come'," and then turning towards the pulpit he remarked, "Afraid of that terrible place." The poet's tribute to the preacher can be applied to Joseph Jenkins--

"If he is anxious not for man's good name,
But that his heavenly master does not blame;
If knowing life's quick passing hours are few,
He preaches with eternity in view,
If caring not though scornful doubt deride
His message is as Paul's "Christ crucified";
Then come in crowds the people and confess
'This is the preaching God is sure to bless'."

We shall conclude our pen-picture of him in the pulpit in a little country chapel, with a congregation of about 50 his text being-- "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?"

"I am a great admirer of Saul of Tarsus. He was no bombast, good enough to be placed in the ranks of the modern university. I would give the world for the honour of being this one's father even if he were never converted. There he goes one Sabbath morn in Tarsus of Cilicia, passing the heathen temple. What would they not have given if he had only turned there once, but he passes them by and goes to the little insignificant synagogue in the Jewish quarters and the light of God's revelation dancing like angels in the corner of his eye. His parents confer with each other after his retirement to rest,' and testify to seeing a strange light in his eyes. His father vows to work harder still to give him a theological training at the feet of Gamaliel in Jerusalem. They have heard a strange story of a carpenter of Nazareth who suggests that the day of Judaism is drawing to an end. So Saul finds himself in Jerusalem, the city of his dreams. By chance there is another Jew, One of the Diaspora, Stephen, who goes about the city contending that the carpenter of Nazareth is alive. And the spirit of God begins to play upon the consciousness of Saul of Tarsus. He makes up his mind to rid Jerusalem and Palestine of this carpenter and his followers. The religious leaders realised that their 'last hope' had arrived and they gave him full powers to sweep the world of the enthusiasts of the New Way. One unforgettable morning, astride the horse of self-righteousness, in the saddle of Judaism, and with the spurs of tradition, we hear the command "Gee-up" Yes young man, but before you reach that city it will be 'get-up.' There he lies in the dust groping

and helpless and when he fell Judaism fell with him. When he got on his feet he had a new conception of the person whom he was persecuting-- 'Lord what wilt thou have me to do?' I remember when in Trevecca College at the end of the first year having our photos taken, a group of pale faces. The photographer had his head under the cover and, while arranging the tripod holding the camera, told us-- "Gentlemen it won't come off, you must get more into the sun." He tried again and succeeded and the photo came out fine. "Dear friends, I have read a great deal lately--modern theologians on the person of Christ with their heads under cover and it didn't come off. Going to my study late after supper and reading Pantycelyn till the early hours of the morning, it came off fine. Williams, Pantycelyn, in the sun. Let me remind you that a new conception of Christ pre-supposes the Damascus experience."

After many months of illness a testimonial was made to him. The cheque was presented at the General Assembly held at Aberdare. After thanking the Assembly for the cheque he said-- "I went to Cwm-Ystwyth lately and standing outside an old lead-mine I saw big lumps of black material which I thought was lead, but I was informed by an old miner that it was rubbish, similar to lead. On enquiring whether there was lead in the mine I was assured by the old miner that there was plenty there if only worked for deep enough. Young preachers, I have been ill of late but not too ill to read books, many of them being rubbish, though similar to the real thing. My advice to you is--Go to the deep mines of salvation, there is plenty of lead in the mine."

Listen to him describing the Prodigal Son, as despair taunts him in his poverty while faith re-assures him and tells him to go home, yet there is a deep river between him and the father's house, the river of conviction and repentance. The prodigal does not go to the seats of learning to have lessons in swimming, but takes the plunge and lands on the opposite bank, and the smell of the old life is cleansed away and his father beseeches him to come home so that his soul may swim in an Atlantic of blessedness. "And his father went and fell upon his neck and kissed him," and held him so tight that had the devil gone between them he would have crushed the life out of him.

Or listen to his description of Calvary: --

"What took place there? An election! And when the boxes were opened the morning of the third day there was not a single vote against Him, and the votes of the Devil were soiled, and Gabriel is still counting the majority."

What a privilege to have heard and known Joseph Jenkins!

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