

Zilpha Elaw

Nineteenth Century Revivalist

One day while milking a cow, Zilpha saw Jesus walking toward her. He appeared to say, "Thy prayer is accepted; I own thy name." Zilpha first thought she was seeing things; but when the cow looked in the same direction, bent its front legs and lowered its head to the ground, she knew the Lord had come to answer her prayer.

Zilpha was born free to religious parents in Pennsylvania around 1790. Her mother died when she was 12 years old, and her father sent her to live with a Quaker family. He died a year and a half later.

As a teen-ager, Zilpha was drawn to Jesus after attending a Methodist camp meeting. Though she sought the Lord daily in prayer, she felt no security in her salvation until she experienced the vision described above.

In 1810 she married Joseph Elaw. The couple made their home in Philadelphia and were blessed with a daughter.

Joseph was a respectable young man, but he wasn't saved. More than once he tried to make his wife renounce her commitment to the Lord.

In 1819, Zilpha was afflicted with an illness that lasted two years. One night as she lay on her sickbed, she received an angelic visitation and was told she would live and attend another camp meeting, where the Lord would reveal her life's purpose.

One year and four months later, the promise was fulfilled. At a camp meeting in Burlington, she heard someone say, "Go outside of the tent while I speak with thee."

As soon as she stepped outside the tent she was led to exhort

all those who stood near. Then she heard a voice say, "Now thou knowest the will of God concerning thee; thou must preach the gospel; and thou must travel far and wide." From then on, she submitted wholly to her divine commission.

When her husband died of consumption in January 1823, she left preaching to work as a domestic. Later she opened a school for African American children, but she closed it after two years because she was convicted of not honoring God's call.

From 1827 to 1840, Zilpha had a successful itinerant preaching ministry in the United States. Though she was afraid of being arrested and sold into slavery, Zilpha preached and traveled extensively in the South, as well as in the Northeast. Men and women, white and black, were brought to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ through her ministry.

In June 1840, Zilpha sailed to England, where she published her memoirs. Historians are not certain whether she ever returned to the United States. Whatever her end, Zilpha was a model for us of how God can use a woman who makes herself totally available to Him.

Jonette O'Kelley Miller is a freelance writer.