



LION *of* GOD

A Biography of
John G. Mitchell, D.D.

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Contents

1. The Measure of a Man.....	009
2. Always Ready.....	015
3. Something Happened.....	027
4. Called to Preach.....	039
5. The Prairie Years.....	044
6. Mary.....	058
7. Tacoma.....	064
8. Dallas.....	072
9. Marriage.....	079
10. Grand Rapids.....	084
11. Young Lion.....	092
12. Winner of Children.....	109
13. Mentor.....	121
14. Husband.....	133
15. Boss.....	145
16. Fisherman.....	156
17. Personal Worker.....	171
18. Brother.....	181
19. Uncle.....	192
20. Pastor.....	204
21. The Lion in Stride.....	223
22. Broadcaster.....	235
23. Humorist.....	241
24. Man of Prayer.....	247
25. Co-Worker.....	254
26. Teacher.....	263
27. Family Man.....	285
28. Old Lion of God.....	297
29. The Lion's Lady.....	315

Chapter Five

*The
Prairie Years*

The young preacher learned quickly: Not everyone wanted to hear.

It was only when you stayed in a particular town for a while, giving them a series of meetings, that the opposition would begin to get together.

Like at Radville.

They threatened that they would put the fire hose on me if I ever went down to the roundhouse at the railroad.

So, of course, I went down to the roundhouse at the railroad and talked to them—the boilermakers and the machinists and those down there.

And, having worked in the shops, you know, I was quite well acquainted with the situation.

So I went in and talked to them and they sheepishly grinned, you know.

They never did put the hose on me.

—John G. Mitchell

Jack spent the early years of his ministry on the prairies of western Canada. His first church was in the small town of Radville, Saskatchewan, and, again, no one was more surprised than he.

He had heard of a special Bible conference held annually in a small community 20 miles away from Calgary in the city of Weyburn. Traveling there by train, he listened eagerly and was unusually attentive to those teaching that summer.

He became acquainted with many friends (among whom was Miss Mary Eby, who later became his wife), and he demonstrated a gift for preaching although he did not speak much.

After the conference ended, he returned to Calgary to his position in the machine shop. But soon he received warm invitations to hold meetings in several places. On his return to Weyburn, he asked about Radville and was told it was another 30 miles away. He and a friend, a Mr. Pringe, decided they would travel there to see the Eby family whom he remembered from the earlier conference.

The two men were asked to conduct a Sunday meeting there. Mr. Pringe took the opening and, after singing and prayer, he said, "Now Mr. Mitchell will bring our message."

This took Jack completely by surprise, but he responded.

Later in the day, Mr. Pringe asked some of the leading men if they would like to have a week of meetings. They readily agreed.

In the evening service, Jack took the opening songs and prayed and announced with a twinkle that his friend would speak.

The next morning they both packed their bags and went to take the train. A Mr. Bean, one of the men from the church, saw them at the station.

He said, "Where are you going?"

They answered, "Back to Weyburn."

"But you announced meetings."

Mr. Pringe said, "Oh, I did that for Jack."

"Well, I don't know who, but one of you will have to stay."

When the train pulled in, Mr. Pringe hopped on it before it stopped. As it pulled away, Mr. Bean turned to Jack and said, "We didn't want him anyway."

So Jack started his week of meetings and stayed there two years.

From the beginning of his Christian life, he had evidenced a consuming desire to know the Scriptures; and his years in Radville, his wife Mary Mitchell later recalled, were years of diligent study. Her aunt, who could see the window of his room above the Eby General Store from her home, would report to the family, "I believe that young man often studies all night."

One time, when called to breakfast, he said, "I am not ready for my next meeting so I must study."

His hostess said, "The Lord will bring all things to your remembrance."

He said, "Yes, I know, but it must be there first."

His study was helped when he got hold of a copy of Cruden's Concordance. Someone gave him Dr. C. I. Scofield's book *Rightly Dividing the*

Word of Truth, and *Romans Verse by Verse* by W. R. Newell. But he continued to make it a habit to search the Scripture to find the answers he needed.

I was troubled because pressure was being put on me concerning the matter of tongues. So I went to my room, and I got out my little old drawing board, and I wrote longhand every verse in the Bible on tongues. And, when I got through examining the thing, I had my answer; and I haven't changed my conviction from that day to this.

His congregation grew with him, Mrs. Mitchell later wrote. Many truths they had not known or completely understood he explained as he studied the book of Romans with them. Many of the folk rightly believed that, when they accepted the Saviour, they became God's children and received eternal life; yet they thought they could still sin and be lost.

"As Jack taught the truth of the wonderful fullness of the grace of God, they rejoiced in the fact of a full and complete salvation," Mary said. He reminded them that, just like their salvation, their hope of heaven was based on what Christ had done on the cross, not on what they themselves had done or could do.

During those years, his ministry was not confined to Radville. He traveled widely across the prairies, holding Bible classes and meetings in many places. He particularly liked to have tent meetings. "You could always get a good crowd in a tent," he said.

He would rig up the tent, first, and then go to a lumber yard and order two by ten boards for benches. He would drill holes in them and cut down a few little saplings for short round legs. Then he would go out to some farmer and get a load of straw. He would strew this around the benches and be all set. When the meetings were over, he would take the timber to the lumber yard and sell it back to the owner. He did this in each town he touched.

One time, during a meeting in southern Saskatchewan with between 150 and 200 people in the tent, eight or ten roughnecks swaggered in and sat on the last two rows of benches. Everyone knew they had come to make mischief. Meetings were often disturbed this way.

And, when we were on the platform, somebody lifted up the tent and said to me, “When you get through, you better come out this way. Those fellows are waiting for you to fix you up.”

Well, I’ve got enough Irish in me that I don’t like that sort of a thing.

And so, when we got through and the meeting was dismissed, those fellows were still sitting there. Everybody else had left the tent.

Well, shall we go out the back or shall we go down there?

You can’t be asking a man to sneak away after he’s preached the gospel just because some fellows were laying for you. Nothing doing. If there was going to be any roughhouse, we’d meet them halfway and throw them off balance and go right through.

So I said to my friend, “Okay, let’s go out. Let’s go right through them.” So we went down the straw aisle between the two sides.

And then, to my utter amazement, when we got about two-thirds of the way down the aisle and were only about 15 or 20 feet from the fellows, my partner shouted at the top of his voice, “The weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but are MIGHTY through God. Now beat it!”

And those fellows got up and –psshht!—they were out of the tent like a shot.

I just stood there.

I said, “What in the world did you do that for?”

He said, “I don’t know. It just popped in my head and I did it.”

“Well,” I said, “it sure worked.” You couldn’t see them for the smoke.

You know, it’s an amazing thing how the Lord cares for you.

At a meeting in a rented store building in another town, some railroad laborers came in. “They were gonna have some fun with us,” Jack said later.

But during the meeting, one of them got up and went out and the rest of them followed.

So Jack and the congregation thought that ended that.

Then, while the preaching was going on, they heard some hammering on the building. The men had gotten some long spikes and were driving them through the door into the door-jam so the people inside couldn’t open the door and get out.

But they forgot something. There was a back door. We all—the congregation, everybody—just went out the back door.

Somebody said, “You better go round to your room. Don’t go down the street because they’re all standing around the front, waiting for you.” Small town, you know. Here’s about 20 fellows. They worked on the railroad, and they were the ones who nailed the door. To them it was a joke.

So, instead of me going on the opposite side of the street, I went right down through them.

I said, “Good night, fellows,” and I kept on going and nothing was said. Oh, it’s great to be a preacher of the gospel, I tell ya.

Pranksters tried all kinds of things—all the time. He’d go out of meetings to find the wheels off his car. “And they religiously took the engine out twice a year,” he said. “Or they would take the shims out.” But that came with the territory.

One of the most memorable experiences came from an invitation he received through the mail. A woman asked that if he ever came to her part of the province would he give them a meeting. They hadn’t had one in nearly 20 years. He wrote back and said, “I’ll be glad to do that.” He gave her a date.

She wrote back with directions: “When you get to a certain town, you can follow the road out four or five miles. You’ll find three prairie trails. You take the left one. After two or three miles, you’ll come to a gate. Go through that and you’ll find my boy waiting for you.”

A little skeptical, he drove his old Chevrolet out into the country and found her directions more exact than he had expected. At the last town, he went to the local telephone operator and asked her to put in a general call to each party line. It cost a nickel a call.

When there was a general call, everybody would run to the phone.

That was the way they used to announce things. The only touch they had with civilization was that little old wire, you know. And you could hear the other fellow whenever he had a call. You had so many rings, and your neighbor had a different number of rings. And oftentimes some of these people used to listen in and see what the other neighbors were talking about.

There was always a warm response to my invitation and often to my message. The place was always filled. I had no trouble in getting a crowd. There's nothing else for them to do to hold their interest, unless they'd go into town and get drunk or go to a show.

On this particular occasion, he got back in his car and took the left trail. Sure enough, he found the gate and a little boy beyond it who opened the gate and jumped on the runningboard for the first ride of his life in a car. He loved it. "Boy-oh-boy-oh-boy," he squealed.

The two of them drove up to the little homestead and the woman came out. She had three little boys, a husband and a hired man. They had dinner and then drove to the schoolhouse three or four miles away.

I preached there until it was dark. That was the place where they had no lights. I asked if I should stop, and someone said, "Go ahead. We don't mind the dark."

And, when I asked them, "How many would like to accept the Saviour?" I said, "Now, I can't see you. And it's no use raising your hand. But you can shout out your name."

And this fella—this old boy from across the Saskatchewan River—he'd driven down half-a-day to get to the meeting because he'd heard about it on the party line—well, he said, "You all know who I am." And he gave his name. And he said, "I'm taking Jesus Christ as my Saviour."

Quite a few did that night.

And on the way back to the house, I led the hired man to the Lord.

The adults were so excited, they sat up until 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning talking. They put the children to bed in the granary. Jack had to sleep in a little bedroom off the kitchen. It had no door, and the bed was a boy's. When his feet were in the bed, Jack's head was out. He could touch the wall every way he turned. He empathized with Isaiah 28:20: "For the bed is shorter than that a man can stretch himself on it: and the covering narrower than that he can wrap himself in it."

He told his hosts they shouldn't bother getting up in the morning because he had a meeting in Saskatoon that night and needed to get on his way. After three hours' sleep, he got up about 6 o'clock and dressed. The woman had the

fire on, and she was making breakfast. So the three of them had breakfast and devotions together.

He got his things together and went out to his car. The woman was there, but her husband was not. Jack wanted to say goodbye to him, too.

I said to her, “Where’s your husband?”

“Oh, he’ll be back in a minute,” she said. “Don’t go before he comes back.”

And, when he came back, he was carrying a milk bucket. He had taken about a gallon of gasoline out of his tractor and he said, “You know, I’m sorry, Mr. Mitchell, but we have no money.”

I said, “I don’t need any money.”

“Well, I want to do something.” And he poured the gasoline into my car so I’d have enough gas to get to Saskatoon. I got very good mileage with that little old car, by the way. I’m sure that sometimes it even ran without gas.

He stopped one night for gas at a country store and said, “Fill’er up.” The proprietor’s boy came back in surprise. “It’s already full,” he said.

Telling these stories when he was in his nineties, John G. Mitchell would stop, sigh and say, “You know. I long for those days again.” He loved that life.

Really, to be frank with you, it was a simple life. I fed well. Some places, I’d have chicken three times a day. Some other places, I’d just have the eggs. You just had to trust the Lord when it came to some of the things you had to eat. You wondered sometimes.

And, occasionally, the accommodations were nothing to be desired. One place in Saskatchewan, when everybody went to bed, he slipped outside after he saw the condition of the bed and the bedroom they offered him. He preferred hay in the hayloft to dirt and bugs.

One time, to help a friend, he had to do the cooking.

A blizzard had come up in the fall, and the man’s entire harvesting crew had quit. This was the same blizzard and the same man with whom he had become lost in the snow and had suffered frostbite on his hands and feet.

When the weather cleared in the spring, his friend tried to hire a new crew.

He came to Jack in distress. He hadn't had any trouble finding men to work. He couldn't find a cook.

He said, "Mitchell, you'll have to cook."

That's when I got the cookbook out.

And I remembered my mother making a rice dish in with the roast. I had a roast and I put it in the oven.

And I filled that big pan with rice and milk, and I beat the eggs in the milk and put 'em on and put some nutmeg on top as my mother did. And then I let it cook.

But, when I peeked in, I had the surprise of my life.

The rice had swelled up.

It had filled that entire stove!

Whether as preacher, teacher, cook, machinist, or friend, Jack felt the Lord had placed him in Radville to serve. One time, miles away, his assistance in repairing a tractor led to the conversion of a man who had no time for the gospel.

He had gone 20 miles out of Radville to see a Swede, named Joe Erickson, whose parents had homesteaded the place and whose younger brother was running it. Jack called Joe, "Old Man Erickson," and his brother, "Young Erickson." Their old parents still lived with them on the farm.

Joe had given himself to the ministry with no background, no schooling at all. But he loved the Lord.

On this particular occasion, Jack had driven out to see how Joe was coming along spiritually.

When he got there, he found the younger brother really discouraged.

He was down in the dumps, you know. He was ready to cut his grave. It was all over his Rumley oil cutter—that's a big tractor truck, by the way. You start it with gasoline, and you push it over to coal oil when it gets warm.

And he said, "I can't run my tractor. I've broken a bearing."

I said, "Let's go look at it."

So we went out and I said, “Well, let’s fix it up.”

And he said, “I went downtown but they won’t help me. They can’t take me for two weeks.”

“Well, let’s do it ourselves. You go downtown and get me some old Babbitt wherever you can find it. By the way, bring a rough file and a mill file, and we’ll pick the scores out of the crank shaft.”

He stayed with the Ericksons several days while he and the younger brother repaired the tractor. On the day he was finishing up, he heard a pig squealing in desperation.

He ran over a small hill and discovered a Poland China sow—a large pregnant white hog with a big black band around its belly—cornered in a slough by a band of six or eight hounds. They were circling tightly around her and slashing at her flanks with their fangs.

And not knowing what I was getting into, I yelled blue murder for help. I threw a lot of mud at the dogs, and I shouted at them. They’d slashed her ears and carved a chunk out of the ham. You could have put your fist in.

But then Old Man Erickson came over the hill. When he came, of course, the dogs moved back, still circling. Then they began moving in closer. I kept throwing stuff at them. I thought the hounds were gonna take me, too.

Erickson got behind the pig with a stick and poked at it, and he and Jack pushed it out of the slough and into the barn. They put some nice clean straw down and called for the veterinarian to come out.

When he got there, he put bluestone—copper sulphate—in the wound. When Jack asked him if the pig would live, he said that he wasn’t too sure.

“The hog may live. It’s pretty badly damaged, but it may live. But don’t expect any of those little ones. I’m sure they’re all dead.” And then he left.

Well, this younger brother—he and his wife professed to be saved, but they were not walking with the Lord by any means—he just wept. These fellas—these homesteaders—were broke, you know. They were counting on those pigs for the winter.

I looked at Young Erickson and I said, “You know, the vet can’t do anything, but we’ve got a God who can. I think it would be time for us to get on our knees and pray for the pig. It means so much to you and the family.”

I said, “The Lord loves us.”

And I said, “Let’s get down and pray for her.”

They got down on their knees in the straw, and Young Erickson just wept like a boy. The three of them put their hands on the hog and prayed that not only the hog would live but that it would give birth to the little ones.

About 2:30 or 3 o’clock in the morning, Jack was awakened by a knock on the door and Young Erickson said to him, “Come on. I wanna show you something.”

So he got out of bed, pulled some pants on and went out to the barn to see the pig. She had given birth to 12 little pigs. “Twelve little butterballs,” Jack called them.

Young Erickson was all smiles at breakfast the next morning because the little pigs and the sow were fine.

As he was getting ready to go back to Radville, having finished fixing the tractor engine, Jack said to him, “She can’t take care of all those 12, can she? You’ll have to give them milk in a bottle in the kitchen, won’t you?”

And he said, “I guess so. I’ll take a couple of them away from her—two or three of them.”

“Well, let me save you that job. Give me two of them,” Jack said. “I’ve got an Irish family over here near Radville—the Murphys. Six kids. And one’s a cripple. They don’t have any meat for the winter.”

And I said, “They’re as poor as you are, and I want to give one of those pigs to the cripple, and I want to give the other one to Murphy.” This was the father. The whole family was saved except the father. They had all been saved in my meetings. I led them all to the Lord, but I couldn’t get him to the meeting.

So I said, “You give me two little pigs and you’ll have ten left to raise for next winter.”

Jack took the sack with the two little pigs Young Erickson brought him and drove the 25 miles to Murphy's house. All six children flocked around his car to welcome him.

I said to the cripple girl—she walked on her toes and heels—her legs never straightened out. I said—the girl was about 12 or 13—I said, “I got a little present for you.” And they all got around my little old car and I pulled out the sack and a little pig jumped out of the sack. They screamed after it, you know. The little pig was running around in circles. It was only a day old, you know—a little butterball.

Jack walked toward the house, calling, “Old Murphy, come on. I got something for you, too.” He took him out to the car and gave him the sack with the other pig in it. That kindness changed the way Old Murphy thought about the gospel. He saw that someone actually cared for him. The next Sunday night, he was in the meeting and came to know the Lord.

Jack said Murphy had “a struggle” giving up. “He drank quite heavily, but the Lord delivered him. The whole family went on with the Lord.”

Jack saw deliverance take another form when he went home with a man for dinner after a meeting in a little town. His host was farming and ranching out in the country on a homestead he had built himself. He had six daughters. He told Jack to go on into the house and that “Mom and the girls will take care of you.” But Jack wasn't married, and there was no way he was going to go into a house with six girls. He decided to wait for his host.

The man didn't see Jack waiting. As he got out of the buggy to take the traces off, he pulled a plug of tobacco out of his pocket and bit off a chunk. Just as he did that, he saw Jack standing on the other side of the buggy.

He began apologizing to him for the tobacco.

“Well,” Jack said, “it's okay with me if you want it. I don't want it. Thank God, I've been delivered from it. You go ahead. It's up to you.”

The man took the traces off and put the horses away. As he and Jack walked to the house, he said, “When I was a boy, we lived in Virginia and we raised tobacco. On the way to school every day, we kids would take a leaf of the tobacco plant and chew it. I've done this all my life.”

I said, “Well, do you know the Saviour?”

“Oh, yes,” he said. “I’ve been saved and I’ve been sanctified. But I can’t get rid of it.”

I said, “I think you better trust the Lord to deliver you. You’ve been struggling to get rid of it and you can’t.”

Jack learned later that the man had been so embarrassed by having someone discover his secret that he went out into the woods to fast and pray for two or three days. But the moment he got back home, he made for the tobacco can again.

Finally, in desperation, he got on his knees and said, “Lord, I’m going to heaven trusting the blood of Jesus Christ, tobacco or no tobacco.”

When he got up from his knees, he became violently sick; and from that day on, he wasn’t able to even stand the smell of tobacco.

As with so many of his stories, Jack used this one in his later preaching when he was giving an exposition of Romans chapter six:

“I tell you that story for a reason,” he’d say. “This man had tried everything including praying and fasting, but he was trusting what he was doing for deliverance instead of trusting the Lord. Paul tells us to yield ourselves to God. Let God do the delivering. Let God have the victory. You can’t win the victory; God wins the victory, and we enjoy the deliverance.”

Jack found, soon enough, that not everyone welcomed his ministry on the western prairies. Invited to a “wee town” way up in Northern Saskatchewan to hold some meetings in the second year of his ministry in Radville, he was accosted on the street by a local pastor “of So-and-So United Church” who recognized a stranger when he saw one.

Jack introduced himself and pointed to the little store building on Main Street where he was holding gospel meetings.

“Oh,” he said, “you’re that preacher.” And then he said, “I understand that you preach that sinners can only be redeemed through the blood of Jesus Christ, a Jew who died 2000 years ago.”

I said, “That’s right, sir. That’s the only way sinners can be saved—through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ who died that we might live.”

He said, “I’m going to tell you, if I had my way, I would liquidate every one of you preachers who preach such a doctrine. I would liquidate you because you are a hindrance to civilization.”

Jack recognized that, if he had been an investor or in most any other line of work, the man would have welcomed him into the village with a “Glad to have you with us, sir. Anything I can do to help you? What can I do to make your stay more enjoyable?” But as a preacher of the gospel of Jesus Christ, murder was too good for Jack. Only “liquidation” would do.

This is not a separate case. How would you like to have written on your sidewalk in front of your house: “We give you so many hours to get out of town?”

What would you do?

You’d stay, of course.

**“These things I have spoken unto you, that in Me ye might have—”
What? Fear? That in Me you’ll get scared that, if you stick to Me, you’ll lose your head?**

No, I tell you! “That in Me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”

Even in Radville, two men in the church made life difficult for Jack by stirring up opposition to his ministry. He got together with the elders and prayed for God’s very real help in the situation. Subsequently, one of the men fell off the back of his tractor and the other fell off a ladder in his store. Both were seriously injured.

During a flu epidemic that ravaged the prairies, Jack stayed up every night for three weeks nursing a man and his wife and six children. Cattle were breaking down fences because people were so sick no one was tending them. Doctors and nurses were simply not available.

When the little baby, the little wee one, took sick, the mother said to me, “Mr. Mitchell, if God heals my baby, I’ll believe.”

God was very gracious in healing her baby.

And then she said to me, “But I thought He would do it in a minute.”

I said, “Mrs. So-and-So, you remind me of what Jesus said: ‘If they believe not the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one be raised from the dead.’”

In the face of that kind of unbelief, Jack would go out, he said later, to walk the prairies and pray all night, pleading with God for people to be saved. But more than pagans lived on those prairies.

Some of the most wonderful truths I ever learned as a young Christian, I learned not in seminary, not in school, but in some old sod shacks way up in northern Canada, sitting on an earthen floor with a homesteader telling me what he or she knew of the Saviour.

It's true.

I didn't know much in those days, and these homesteaders were not men of the schools. They were not scholars.

But don't tell me they didn't know the things of God.

There was a sweetness, an aroma about them in the things of Christ that stirred in me a tremendous yearning: "This is what I want. This is real—not something to tickle my intellect, but something to reach the need of my heart."

I saw the reality of life in Christ.