

Ellen G. White, her
Friends and Fellow-workers

JAMES WHITE

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The best way to become acquainted with a person is to talk with him. Elder White died in 1881, but through his many letters, his wife's letters ^{the} and books written about him, his strong personality comes to life. Let's interview Ellen G. White's husband:

--Elder White, how did you and your wife meet each other?

J.W.: Let's first go back to the beginning of the story. We were both born in the same state--Maine. The White farm was in Palmyra, where my father brought up his nine children, with me the middle child. Ellen's home was farther south, around Gorham and Portland. There were eight little Harmons (she was a twin), so there were plenty of young Whites and Harmons! Incidentally, I was born in 1821, she in 1827--which made me six years her senior.

--Were you children when you met?

J.W.: Be patient. It's a long story, and an interesting one. You might say it was William Miller and the 1844 message that brought us together. But first I had to get an education. While a boy, I was weak, sickly and nervous. When I tried to read, my eyes would cross. So instead of trying to go to school and get laughed at by the other children, I helped my father farm our stony acres. This was just the medicine I needed. By fifteen I was strong, tall and healthy--but uneducated. One day in 1840 I turned up at St. Albans Academy, a sack of bread over my back which had to last for six days--ready for school. At the end of twelve weeks, I was given a certificate to teach school, which I did the very next term! After that I went to a sort of "summer school" for five weeks and that ended my formal education.

Then I heard a message that changed my life. Jesus was coming--soon.

James White--2

I felt that the students I had been teaching must hear the news. "I will go," I promised God. That was in 1842, and I've been preaching ever since.

That year, in September, I heard William Miller speak in a large tent, to crowds of interested listeners. After that, it seemed I had to tell the world to get ready to meet the King. I saddled my horse, Jonah, with patched-up harness and set out. And God gave His blessing. "Through the winter months of 1842-3, more than 1,000 men and women were led to Christ."--SDA Encyclopedia, p. 1420

Now let's talk about Ellen. She was shy, quiet and physically weak as a result of an accident. When she heard William Miller preach in Portland, she believed his message. Then God spoke to her, "Go tell others," and she begged Him to lay the burden on someone more capable, feeling that, in her weakness, she could never do it. But she placed her trust in Him--and Ellen Harmon became God's special messenger.

So, with me traveling and preaching, and with her inspired of God to spread the message, we were bound to meet. The first time I really became acquainted with her was when she made a trip to Orrington, Maine. I had heard of her and had seen her with her family, in Portland. Now I would hear her speak.

--Was she pretty? Did you fall in love the first time you saw her?

J.W.: Pretty? I didn't think about that. My first reaction was that she was small, and frail, and that I must try to protect her from the coarseness, roughness and actual danger she might meet while doing God's work. Of course I noticed that she had beautiful big brown eyes, and the sweetest smile! Ellen wasn't traveling alone. Usually her brother Robert, one or two of her sisters, or some youthful believers were with her. But I decided that I should join them as often as possible. When scoffers saw my six-foot frame, they would hesitate before harming Ellen Harmon!

--During these trips, were you ever in real danger?

Answer: Yes, we were. For one thing, the gossips got busy. Ellen's mother wrote to her. I can still remember that letter: "Come home, Ellen, my daughter," it said. "False reports are being circulated about you. You should not be traveling all over the countryside like that. It is not fitting and proper for one of your age to do this." Ellen cried when she read it. She wondered why people would say unkind and untrue things about us, when we were traveling in a group, doing God's work.

But the worst time I had was in the spring of 1845. Ellen and some girl friends had to get home to Portland. Some friends and I decided to row them down the Penobscot River from Orrington to Belfast, where they could catch a steamer to Portland. It was pleasant floating downstream, and easy rowing. But after the girls got off, we had to turn the boat around and row twenty miles upstream. The going was hard and we became exhausted. Being in a hurry to return the boat and get home, we rowed vigorously. At the landing, a mob of rough and angry men awaited us.

"Where is Miss Harmon?" they shouted. "We want Miss Harmon!" I learned later that they had searched the house where she had been staying and were furious to learn that she had gone. Well, these ruffians grabbed us and beat us. If we hadn't been tired we might have fought back more successfully! I found out then what it felt like to be publicly horsewhipped and dragged off to jail! But through it all I was so thankful that Ellen had escaped. I had faced mobs before, dodging snowballs with rocks inside of them, and even spikes such as are used in railway building. But this time the mob was after a frail young woman, and I despised their cowardly spirit.

After the disappointment it was even more important for us to get out among the scattered believers. But "Ellen's health was very poor, and it seemed possible that tuberculosis would rapidly cause her death unless some miracle was

wrought. She weighed only eighty pounds, and had frequent fainting spells. . . . Yet she forced herself to travel and meet people."

"Neither her aged father nor feeble brother were suitable persons to travel with one so feeble." Although I was her opposite in nearly every way, I realized that we made an excellent working team. We realized that we were learning to care for each other, and we prayed for guidance. Heaven seemed to smile upon us and, on August 26, 1846, we were married. I was twenty-five and Ellen not quite nineteen. "From that hour to the present she has been my crown and my rejoicing."

--Weren't you scared to marry a prophet?

J.W.: I didn't look at it in that light. We both had a burden to warn the world of Jesus' soon coming, and I felt that I could be a help to her. I did most certainly realize that she had been specially chosen of God to act as His Messenger. But that fact wouldn't hinder our marriage.

--Did she start right in telling you what to do?

J.W.: She didn't. But God did, through her. I'll never forget when she had that vision in November, 1848. When it was finished she said, "James, I have a message for you. You must begin to print a little paper and send it out to the people. Let it be small at first; but as the people read, they will send you means with which to print, and it will be a success from the first. From this small beginning it was shown to me to be like streams of light that went clear round the world."--Life Sketches, p. 125

--Where were you living then?

J.W.: We were staying with friends, the Beldens, near Rocky Hill, Connecticut. They had put a large, unfinished upstairs room at our disposal. The nearest printer was seven miles away, in Middletown. "I had to walk to and fro two or three times every week and write, correct, fold, wrap and mail

James White--5

the papers; however, the girls folded and wrapped most of them. But it has been the hardest summer's work I ever have done in my life. No one can form a correct idea of the labor of thought, care, and perplexity of publishing until they try it."--JW letter Sept. 8, 1849

--If you were so poor, how did you pay the printer?

J.W.: He printed one thousand copies of the paper "Present Truth" for us, on faith that he would receive his money. After the papers were mailed out, money came in and I was able to settle with him--sixty-four dollars and fifty cents! I had every step of that Rocky Hill-Middletown road memorized. But it was worth it. That small paper grew into our weekly church publication, the Review and Herald.

Remember this. More than anything else, I wanted to carry out God's will for my life. And ~~if~~ ^{when} help and advice came through my godly wife, I was thankful for it.

--Did she ever receive reproofs for you, when she was in vision?

J.W.: She certainly did. And sometimes it was hard for me to accept them. (See SDA Encyclopedia p. 1425) Like any wife with a hardworking husband, she was concerned about my health. When I overworked (which was much of the time)--or failed to eat good, nourishing food, she told me that I was breaking the laws of health. ^{Also,} I have fought all my life against a quick, hasty, impatient spirit, and God has given Mrs. White reproof for me on that subject.

Here is an example of a letter written to me when she was in California:
"Dear Husband: . . . March 18, 1880

"As regards ourselves, . . . Let us not be so ready to vindicate our own course. Talk of Jesus, exalt Him, and let self sink into nothingness. Little have we suffered for the truth's sake. We know but little of self-denial and suffering. . . .

We shall have enough to praise God for in the future life. We shall thank God for every reproof which taught us our own weakness, and our Saviour's

James White--6

power, patience, and love. Jesus' manner of working should be our manner. . . .

"I am not what I ought to be, or what Jesus would have me. I see that I must have more of the spirit of the Master.

"I must not let one thought or one feeling arise in my heart against my brethren, for they may be in the sight of God more righteous than I. My feelings must not be stirred. We have battles to fight with ourselves, but we should continually encourage our brethren, . . .and should cherish only the very kindest feelings toward them. . . .

Now, dear husband, I would not harbor feelings that this one is injuring me and that one is hurting me. Have confidence in your brethren, and do not censure them in thought, by pen, or by word. Let the softening, subduing influence of the Spirit of God into the heart. . . .

"I will write out the testimonies of reproof for any one and then my feelings shall not be exercised against them. I will look within. . . .And when tempted to feel unkindly or to be suspicious and to find fault, I will put this out of my heart quickly. . . .

"Let us respect our brethren, give them credit for honesty of purpose and unselfish motives, as we wish they should do for us. We should treat all, rich and poor, high or lowly, exactly as we wish them to treat us. . . .

"Let us, dear husband, make melody to God in our hearts. . . .Let us talk of Jesus and His matchless love. . . .I weep over my own hardness of heart, my life which has not been a correct example to others. Let us bring ourselves into harmony with heaven and we will then be in harmony with our brethren and at peace among ourselves.

"Forgive me for any words of impatience that have escaped my lips, every seeming act of wrong in your sight. I mean to . . .keep my own heart in the love of God, and make sure work for eternity. . . .May the Lord teach and lead and guide you is my prayer, and may nothing shake our hold on Him." Letter 5, 1880

James White--7

Could anyone feel hard or bitter after receiving a testimony like that?

--No, they couldn't, because while reproofing others, Sister White showed that she was trying, right along with them, to overcome ~~her own weaknesses~~ in her own life, and to draw nearer to Jesus.

Elder White, as founder of the Seventh-day Adventist church, (Encycl. p. 1419) you have been kept so busy that I wonder if you have had any time to work for children and young people.

JW: I'm glad you asked. This has been the most important part of our work. Back in 1852 I wrote, "The children should have a paper of their own, one that will interest and instruct them," (Encycl. p. 1444) and in August of that year, the first copy of our "Youth's Instructor" appeared. This paper was literally "on my mind," for when travelling in those early days, I carried copy for it rolled inside my tall black stovepipe hat. Whenever old Charlie, our horse, had to rest, I sat on a grassy bank by the side of the road, used my hat for a writing desk and wrote articles for those early youth papers. From then on, my life, and the lives of our two sons, Edson and Willie, have been wrapped up in the publishing work. The light from heaven given through the Spirit of Prophecy must get out to the world. The printed page--that's the way to do it!

--Thanks, Elder White, for this interview. You and your dedicated wife, Ellen, truly make a powerful leadership team! With God's help, we young people can follow the trail you have blazed, knowing that it will lead to the City of God.