

escape from the flames

How Ellen White grew from fear to joy
—and helped me do it too

Alden Thompson



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**Dedicated to the little flock of faithful Adventists
in Scotland.**

**Their deeply rooted faith and confident hope gave us
an anchor when we needed it most.**

Note: From 1972–1974, my wife, Wanda, and I lived in Scotland with our two daughters, Karin and Krista, while I was completing doctoral studies at the University of Edinburgh. The Edinburgh Church, with some forty members, was home, but the believers at Perth (seven first-generation Adventists), Dunfermline, and Dundee were also a source of inspiration and encouragement. Some five million people live in Scotland; less than three hundred are Adventists. We've been back many times since. The believers there continue to bless us, and we are grateful.

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A Brief Word From the Author

You might expect a long story here at the beginning. Almost miraculously, I'm going to keep it short, very short. The reason is that the whole book is essentially a story—my story of how I have related to the life and writings of Ellen White.

I'm a very devout person, but also very curious. Had I been at the burning bush where Moses met God, my shoes would have come off immediately. But then I would have been bursting with eagerness to ask a question: "How did You do that?"

My deep love for God is His gift to me. So is my sense of curiosity. And for reasons which I cannot fully explain, the life and writings of Ellen White have helped me bring together the very different worlds of worship and curiosity. For that I am profoundly grateful. I know I am too fervent for some, too honest for others. And I'm sorry about that. But I really do want you to hear the story. I believe God gave His people a great and good gift when He called Ellen White to be His messenger. Tragically, we have often misused the gift. I'll have something to say about that, too, in this book. But *gratitude* is the word I want to loom larger than anything else.

I am also very much a people person. That's why my church is so important to me. I revel in every opportunity to come together with those who share the same hope—to laugh, to cry, to talk, to sing together, and sometimes even to whine together. My prayer is that this book will help us do all of that more and better—except maybe for the whining.

Now a brief warning: Chapter 6 is the exciting chapter. That's the one that tells how Ellen White escaped from hell—the doctrine of hell. But escaping from hell isn't easy. You have to go through five chapters before you're ready.

That's it. You didn't think I could be this short, did you? Let's get on with the story.

Ellen White's Story— Briefly

If you and I were on a bus together and you had heard the name Ellen White for the very first time but wanted to know more, this is what I'd tell you:

Ellen Harmon White was a co-founder of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, a Protestant movement that developed in the aftermath of the great Millerite Disappointment of 1844.

Born in 1827 in Gorham, Maine, young Ellen suffered from very poor health in her childhood, mostly as a result of a stone thrown by a schoolmate that struck her in the face. That event ended Ellen's formal schooling.

Her family were devout Methodists who were attracted by the preaching of William Miller. Based on his study of the prophecies of Daniel, especially the 2,300-day prophecy of Daniel 8:14, Miller believed Jesus would return around 1843. He attracted a large following from a wide variety of denominations. By 1840, many Millerites began to be more specific in setting dates. October 22, 1844 became the focal point of great expectation—then turned into “The Great Disappointment.”

Young Ellen was among those who continued to believe that God's hand was leading the Millerite movement. In December 1844, she received her first vision, a message of encouragement to the “little flock.” When she continued to have visions, those Adventists who would eventually organize the Seventh-day Adventist Church came to the conclusion that God had given her the gift of prophecy in accordance with the New Testament promises in Ephesians 4 and 1 Corinthians 12. Thus her fellow believers confirmed her unique role in Adventism.

After the Disappointment, earnest Bible study led the group in formu-

lating the “landmark” beliefs that would mark Adventist identity—the seventh-day Sabbath, the nearness of the Second Coming, the nonimmortality of the soul, and the understanding that the “cleansing of the sanctuary” of Daniel 8:14 referred to Christ’s ministry in the heavenly sanctuary, not to an event on earth.

In 1846 Ellen married James White, another of the early Adventist pioneers. They had four sons.¹ Both James and Ellen played key roles in the events leading up to the formal organization of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in 1863. Describing how the two of them worked together in ministry, Ellen noted that her husband “would give a doctrinal discourse, then I would follow with an exhortation of considerable length, melting my way into the feelings of the congregation. Thus my husband sowed and I watered the seed of truth, and God did give the increase.”² In spite of the poverty and illness that often dogged them in their early years, they worked tirelessly to advance the Advent cause.

In the early years of Adventism, Ellen White played a key role in spurring those developments that still are important in Adventism—publications, beginning in the late 1840s, health reform in the 1860s, education and missions in the 1870s. She remained active after her husband died in 1881, spending several years in Europe (1885–1887) and in Australia (1891–1900).

At two contentious and pivotal General Conference sessions—the “Righteousness by Faith” session of 1888 and the “Reorganization” session of 1901—she played a key role in urging her fellow Adventists to be more Christlike in their treatment of each other.

Today, Ellen White is perhaps best known for her writings, especially her counsels to the church and her devotional commentaries on Scripture.³ Since her death in 1915, and in accordance with instructions laid down in her will, the Ellen G. White Estate makes her writings available to the church. Many topical compilations and daily devotionals have been published under the guidance of the Ellen G. White Estate. All of her published writings are now available on disk.

Ellen White’s dominant role in Adventism continues to be deeply appreciated by many within the Adventist Church, vigorously discussed by all, and undoubtedly regretted by some. The questions that surface again and again are those that constitute the major reason for this book: How do her

writings relate to the Bible? And how should the church and its members understand her “authority”?

¹ Henry (1847–1863), their oldest, died at age sixteen. James Edson (1849–1928) was rather wayward for a number of years, but ended up with a significant ministry among ex-slaves in the American South. William Clarence (1854–1937), usually known as Willie or W.C., played a more public role in Adventism, especially in connection with his mother’s ministry after his father died in 1881. John Herbert, their fourth son, was born in 1860, but lived only a few months.

² *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1, p. 75 (1881).

³ Many of her counsels to people and church groups, spanning the years 1855 to 1909, are included in the nine-volume set, *Testimonies for the Church*. Her five-volume devotional commentary on Scripture, the Conflict of the Ages series, continues to be popular, with *The Desire of Ages* (1898/1911) and *The Great Controversy* (1888) probably the best known. *The Desire of Ages* is the story of Jesus’ life and ministry; *The Great Controversy* traces the continuing story of the conflict between good and evil from the time of Jesus’ ascension to the final destruction of evil in the lake of fire. Her book *Education* (1903) continues to shape Adventist schools, and her other books on the life of Christ are also very popular: *Steps to Christ* (1892); her commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing* (1896); her book on Jesus’ parables, *Christ’s Object Lessons* (1900); and her commentary and health applications based on Jesus’ healing miracles, *The Ministry of Healing* (1905).