

The Story of Great Controversy And the Spirit of Prophecy 06. The Final Days

It was late July. During these final weeks in the life of James, Ellen struggled, amid the mounting tensions and continual interruptions in Battle Creek, to work on her bookwork. But her life forces were wearing down from the pressure.

“Up to the time I had commenced this work I was sick, but the Lord gave me strength. I did not get to rest until near midnight, and labored all through the day, writing. Wednesday night I felt I must have rest. A nervous twitching seized my thumb and I could have no control over it. It jerked continually. I feared paralysis.” Letter 8a, 1881.

The weekly Review of August 2 carried a back-page note about three camp meetings the Whites were going to visit. But James and Ellen did not attend those meetings. The next issue of the Review carried a notice of James White’s death.

God deeply loved James, and He knew he had made his peace with God, had forgiven those who had injured him; and it was time to lay him to rest. Later James would be able to meet Ellen again at the Second Coming of their blessed Lord. James and Ellen headed off to the first camp meeting in a carriage together. She later recalled their conversation that day.

“We had an appointment to attend a tent meeting at Charlotte, Sabbath and Sunday, July 23 and 24. We decided to travel by private conveyance. On the way, my husband seemed cheerful, yet a feeling of solemnity rested upon him.

“He repeatedly praised the Lord for mercies and blessings received, and freely expressed his own feelings concerning the past and future: “The Lord is good, and greatly to be praised. He is a present help in time of need. The future seems cloudy and uncertain, but the Lord would not have us distressed over these things. When trouble comes, He will give us grace to endure it. What the Lord has been to us, and what He has done for us, should make us so grateful that we would never murmur or complain.

“ ‘It has seemed hard to me that my motives should be misjudged, and that my best efforts to help, encourage, and strengthen my brethren should again and again be turned against me. But I should have remembered Jesus and His disappointments. His soul was grieved that He was not appreciated by those He came to bless. I should have dwelt upon the mercy and loving-kindness of God, praising Him more, and complaining less of the ingratitude of my brethren. Had I ever left all my perplexities with the Lord, thinking less of what others said and did against me, I should have had more peace and joy. I will now seek first to guard myself, that I offend not in word or deed, and then to help my brethren make straight paths for their feet. I will not stop to mourn over any wrong done to me. I have expected more of men than I ought. I love God and His work, and I love my brethren also.’ ” In Memorium, 50-51.

Ellen continued: “Little did I think, as we traveled on, that this was the last journey we should ever make together. The weather changed suddenly from oppressive heat to chilling cold. My husband took cold, but thought his health so good that he would receive no permanent injury.

“He labored in the meetings at Charlotte, presenting the truth with great clearness and power. He spoke of the pleasure he felt in addressing a people who manifested so deep an interest in the subjects

most dear to him. 'The Lord has indeed refreshed my soul,' he said, 'while I have been breaking to others the bread of life. All over Michigan the people are calling eagerly for help. How I long to comfort, encourage, and strengthen them with the precious truths applicable to this time!'

"On our return home, my husband complained of slight indisposition, yet he engaged in his work as usual. Every morning we visited the grove near our home, and united in prayer. We were anxious to know our duty. Letters were continually coming in from different places, urging us to attend the camp meetings. Notwithstanding our determination to devote ourselves to writing, it was hard to refuse to meet with our brethren in these important gatherings. We earnestly pleaded for wisdom to know the right course.

"Sabbath morning, as usual, we went to the grove together, and my husband prayed most fervently three times. He seemed reluctant to cease pleading with God for special guidance and blessing. His prayers were heard, and peace and light came to our hearts. He praised the Lord, and said: 'Now I give it all up to Jesus. I feel a sweet, heavenly peace, an assurance that the Lord will show us our duty; for we desire to do His will.'

"He accompanied me to the Tabernacle, and opened the services with singing and prayer. It was the last time he was ever to stand by my side in the pulpit." In Memorium, 551-52.

Suddenly Gone: Monday, James developed a severe chill. Tuesday, his condition worsened rapidly. Tuesday night, Ellen was attacked by a chill and became sick. Wednesday, they were both taken to the Battle Creek Sanitarium, carried there while laying side by side on a mattress in the back of a wagon.

Two days later, on Friday, Ellen was feeling better. Arising from the bed, she went to James' room.

"The doctor then informed me that my husband was inclined to sleep, and that danger was apprehended. I was immediately taken to his room, and as soon as I looked upon his countenance I knew that he was dying. I tried to arouse him. He understood all that was said to him, and responded to all questions that could be answered by yes or no, but seemed unable to say more.

"When I told him I thought he was dying, he manifested no surprise. I asked if Jesus was precious to him. He said, 'Yes, oh, yes.' 'Have you no desire to live?' I inquired. He answered, 'No.' We then knelt by his bedside, and I prayed for him. A peaceful expression rested upon his countenance. I said to him: 'Jesus loves you. The everlasting arms are beneath you.' He responded, 'Yes, yes.'" Life Sketches, 251.

Those gathered about the bed knelt in prayer. The next morning, James seemed slightly better, but then there was a turn for the worst. "About noon he had a chill, which left him unconscious. At 5 p.m., Sabbath, August 6, 1881, he quietly breathed his life away, without a struggle or a groan." Life Sketches, 252.

The utter shock of her husband's death caused Ellen to collapse. That night, she came close to death. Two nurses watched her all night, frequently taking her pulse; so that, if necessary, they could immediately report to the doctor if a crisis developed. "At twelve o'clock at night my pulse stopped . . . He [Dr. J.H. Kellogg] was at my bedside in one minute. I was unable to speak but knew what was going on. I expected to pass away quietly as my husband had done, but the doctor worked unremittingly with the two helpers until three o'clock in the morning . . .

"One stood with a cake of ice and another with a hot sponge and passed first hot, then cold, over the spine for three hours until my pulse, though very weak, and fluttery, was improved. For four nights

these faithful hands battled with death and were rewarded by seeing a determined improvement.” Letter 9, 1881.

On Sabbath afternoon, August 13, about 2,500 believers, plus many Battle Creek townspeople assembled in the Tabernacle for the funeral of James White. Even though very ill, Ellen attended.

“We then went in hacks [lengthy horse-drawn wagons] to the Tabernacle, and I was carried in a chair while the mourners followed. I was laid upon a sofa prepared with pillows. I was carefully watched by the doctor.” Letter 9, 1881.

Uriah Smith gave the funeral address. When finished, Ellen determined to speak also. She was helped to the podium and a doctor stood near to catch her if she started to fall.

“As I arose, strength was given me, and I spoke about ten minutes, exalting the mercy and love of God in the presence of that crowded assembly.” Life Sketches, 252.

Her entire message was written down. Here is another excerpt: “How long I shall fight the battles of life alone I cannot say; but there is one thing that I will say to you, and that is, that when I saw my husband breathe his last, I felt that Jesus was more precious to me than He ever had been in any previous hour in my life . . .

“I look to that morning when the broken family links shall be reunited, and we shall see the King in His beauty, and behold His matchless charms, and cast our glittering crowns at His feet, and touch the golden harp and fill all heaven with the strains of our music and songs to the Lamb. We will sing together there. We will triumph together around the great white throne.” In Memorium, 40-42.

Ninety-five carriages joined in the funeral procession to Oak Hill Cemetery, and nearly a hundred people went there on foot. James White was laid to rest in the family plot.

Journey West: As reported by Uriah Smith in the Review (August 23 issue), after the funeral, Ellen rapidly recovered. On Sabbath morning, August 20, she spoke to the church members for 50 minutes “with great clearness of mind and strength of voice.” This was the last time she spoke to that congregation, prior to leaving for the West.

“At times I felt that I could not have my husband die. But these words seemed to be impressed on my mind: ‘Be still, and know that I am God.’ . . . I keenly feel my loss, but I dare not give myself up to useless grief. This would not bring back my husband . . . The best way in which I and my children can honor the memory of him who has fallen is to take the work where he left it, and in the strength of Jesus carry it forward to completion.” Manuscript 6, 1881.

That is good counsel for all of us, when we lose our loved ones. Ellen immediately prepared for the journey. The Lord told her that she should select a young nurse at the Sanitarium, a Scottish lady named Sara Mc-Enterfer, to be her lifelong companion. When asked for her decision, Sara gladly accepted. She proved to be an excellent helper and traveling companion throughout the remainder of Ellen’s life. Stopping in Colorado to rest up briefly, Ellen wrote a lengthy letter to the leaders and members that would gather at the Michigan camp meeting:

“Dear Brethren and Sisters who shall assemble at the Michigan Camp Meeting: I feel a deeper interest in this meeting than in any other that has been held this season. Michigan has not had the labor which she should have had. God has planted important institutions among you, and this brings upon you greater responsibilities than upon any other conference in the whole field. Great light has been given

you, and few have responded to it; yet my heart goes out in tender solicitude for our beloved people in Michigan.” 5 Testimonies, 9 (letter dated September 25, 1881).

Leaving Colorado on October 2, they headed west and arrived in Oakland, California in time for the opening of camp meeting there, on October 13. In light of her recent illness, it was not expected that she would speak. But she spoke almost every afternoon to the assembly.

It was not until the early summer of 1882 that Ellen had recovered sufficiently to settle down to a consistent program of book production. She knew that the Lord had laid on her the burden of producing a number of crucial, truth-filled books. Oh, that we today might realize our responsibility to read them!

Her primary concern was to write, what would become known as, the 1884 edition of Great Controversy. This weighed most heavily upon her. But, along with its preparation, several other long-delayed writing projects required completion. Earlier written materials were pieced together, along with a small amount of new comments, and released as new books.

At the General Conference Session of 1879, the brethren had voted to recommend; “. . . the publication of a small edition of her [Ellen White’s] earliest writings, now out of print, to bring all her writings within the reach of those anxious to obtain them.” Review, December 4, 1879.

It was important that these writings be reprinted. Satan had encouraged critics who declared that Ellen taught totally different teachings in earlier years; therefore none of them could be trusted.

Every possible method of attacking the Spirit of Prophecy and its author has been made over the years, and will continue to be made to the close of time. Those willing to cooperate with the devil in that diabolical work, and do not repent, will perish with him. By mid-1882, Ellen was busily working on Great Controversy. For the first time in 24 years, she was at last working on a clear, expanded presentation of the Lovett’s Grove vision.

In spite of repeated efforts to work on Vol. 4, Ellen had been unable to do anything on it during the last two years of James’ life. Her bookwork had been brought to a total stop by all the mounting problems at Battle Creek.

But now, a new hindrance developed when the publishing house wanted to limit the number of pages in Vol. 4. But Ellen insisted that it be longer, and got her way. The 1884 Great Controversy was her first large book. It was revealed to Ellen White that she should present the controversy between Christ and Satan as it developed, both in the first centuries of the Christian era and in the great Reformation of the sixteenth century, in such a way as to prepare the mind of the reader to understand clearly the controversy going on in these last days.

An overview of the entire 6,000-year conflict of the ages had been presented to Ellen in that earlier 1858 vision at Lovett’s Grove, Ohio. And a multitude of detailed items were revealed as she now began work on the 1884 edition of Great Controversy. This information came to her in two ways: First, she read extensively in Christian History books. The Lord guided her to recognize that which was correct. Second, as she wrote, she would, in brief visions, be shown scenes and given additional information. While writing on this book, some of the scenes were presented to Ellen over and over again.