



Did Ellen White Suffer From Depression?

YOU MIGHT BE SURPRISED
AT THIS GLIMPSE INTO
HER PERSONAL LIFE.

“CHRISTIANS WILL NOT BE mournful, depressed, and despairing,”¹ wrote Ellen White.

Really? When I have feelings of despondency, have I lost my Christianity? Some would say so. Is that what Ellen White implies?

As we look at her writings, it’s important to remember that Ellen White used the common language of her day to describe emotional health. She was not diagnosing mental states as a licensed psychiatrist might do today after a patient’s thorough examination. And the counsel she offered to those she described as suffering with depression may not be fully applicable to every individual who is challenged by what is currently called major or clinical depression.

In her autobiographical accounts Ellen White frequently describes times of depression and melancholy. Many were merely a passing sadness over present conditions, but others were extended periods of gloom and discouragement. She often attributed her depressed spirits to physical ill-health, which she suffered throughout her life, in part as a result of the life-threatening accident she experienced at age 9.

In 1859 Ellen candidly informed church members, “For years I have been afflicted with dropsy [edema] and disease of the heart, which has had a tendency to depress my spirits and destroy my faith and courage.” She described having felt “no desire to live” and being unable to muster enough faith even to “pray for my recovery.”² During this time she confided in her diary, “Oh, why is it that such gloom rests upon everything? Why can I not rise above this depression of spirit? . . . I have no health and my mind is completely depressed.”³

UNDERSTANDING THESE EMOTIONS

Even in healthier times, though, Ellen White knew from experience that emotions can turn inexplicably. “I have had a very depressed state of feelings today, unaccountably sad,” she wrote to her husband, James. “I could not explain why I felt so exceedingly sad.”⁴

On other occasions Ellen White knew exactly why she felt as she did. As the Lord’s messenger, she was uniquely sensitive to the spiritual deficiencies of individuals and the church generally. Both she and James carried the state of the church continually upon their hearts: “Our happiness has depended upon the state of the cause of God. When God’s people are in a prospering condition, we feel free. But when they are in disorder and

“Despondency may shake the most heroic faith.”

backslidden, nothing can make us joyful. Our whole interest and life has been interwoven with the rise and progress of the third angel’s message. We are bound up in it, and when it does not prosper, we experience great suffering of mind.”⁵

Ellen White recognized that there are a variety of causes for depression beyond physical illness, including diet, genetics, guilt, inactivity, and the weather.⁶ She knew the darkness of losing children and even one’s life companion to death. Recalling the bereavement of her 3-month-old son John Herbert, she wrote, “After we returned from the funeral, my home seemed lonely. I felt reconciled to the will of God, yet despondency and gloom settled upon me.”⁷

Ellen White found hope in the biblical accounts of spiritual giants who experienced periods of deep discouragement, yet who were not abandoned by God: individuals such as Elijah, David, and Paul. Even Jesus, she noted, was not free from such feelings.⁸ Of Elijah she wrote, “If, under trying circumstances, men of spiritual power, pressed beyond measure, become discouraged and desponding, if at times they see nothing desirable in life, that they should choose it, this is nothing strange or new. . . . Those who, standing in the forefront of the conflict, are impelled by the Holy Spirit to do a special work, will frequently feel a reaction when the pressure is removed. Despondency may shake the most heroic faith and weaken the most steadfast will. But God understands, and He still pities and loves.”⁹

Writing to her son Edson, who had a tendency to “look on the dark side” of things, Ellen White reminded him that “with the continual change of circumstances, changes come in our experience; and by these changes we are either elated or depressed. But the change of circumstances has no power to change God’s relation to us. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever; and He asks us to have unquestioning confidence in His love.”¹⁰

HER ADVICE

What counsel did Ellen White give to those suffering under depression, and how did she herself cope with such feelings? She learned that support from family and friends can be invaluable.

Often it was the prayers of close associates that broke the spell of darkness.¹¹ Recalling the feelings of overwhelming despair that followed her childhood accident, Ellen White reflected, “I concealed my troubled feelings from my family and friends, fearing that they could not understand me. This was a mistaken course. Had I opened my mind to my mother, she might have instructed, soothed, and encouraged me.”¹²

Ellen White also recommended the benefits of outdoor activity, gardening, enjoying nature, and simply praising God.¹³ She counseled others to go “right along, singing and making melody to God in your hearts, even when depressed by a sense of weight and sadness.” “I tell you as one who knows,” she added, “light will come, joy will be ours, and the mists and clouds will be rolled back.”¹⁴

While Ellen White acknowledged the reality of such emotions, it was her practice not to give voice to negative feelings and thereby spread an atmosphere of gloom among others. She was determined that faith should conquer feeling. When one reads of her experiences, almost invariably what turned the tide was a deliberate and purposeful decision on her part not to succumb to such troubled states of mind through a firm reliance on God’s love in spite of His apparent absence.

But the victory was by no means easily obtained. Typical of her resolve to break through the darkness is this description written after a long period of excruciating physical pain with its negative emotional effects: “It is not a common thing for me to be overpowered, and to suffer so much depression of spirit as I have suffered for the last few months. I would not be found to trifle with my own soul, and thus trifle with my Savior. I would not teach that Jesus has risen from the tomb, and that He is ascended on high, and lives to make intercession for us before the Father, unless I carry out my teaching by practice, and believe in Him for His salvation, casting my helpless soul upon Jesus for grace, for righteousness, peace, and love. I must trust in Him irrespective of the changes of my emotional atmosphere. I must show forth the praises of Him who has called me out of darkness into His marvelous light.”¹⁵

Did Ellen White Suffer From Depression?

Will Christians be “mournful, depressed, and despairing”? Ellen White recognized through Scripture and by personal experience that faithful believers are not exempt from these emotions, but neither should they characterize the life. With Paul we can say, “We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair. . . . We fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal” (2 Corinthians 4:8-18, NIV). **7**

1. Ellen G. White, in *Review and Herald*, Apr. 15, 1884. See also Ellen G. White, *Child Guidance* (Nashville: Southern Pub. Assn., 1954), p. 146.
2. Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1948), vol. 1, p. 185.
3. Ellen G. White manuscript 6, 1859, in *The Ellen G. White Letters and Manuscripts With Annotations* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 2014), vol. 1, pp. 632, 633.
4. Ellen G. White letter 7, 1876, in Ellen G. White, *Manuscript Releases* (Silver Spring, Md.: Ellen G. White Estate, 1990-1993), vol. 7, p. 278.
5. Ellen G. White, *Spiritual Gifts* (Battle Creek, Mich.: James White, 1860), vol. 2, p. 297.

6. For examples, see Ellen G. White, *Mind, Character, and Personality* (Nashville: Southern Pub. Assn., 1977), vol. 2, pp. 482-496, 807-812.
7. E. G. White, *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 2, p. 296.
8. Matthew 26:38; John 12:27; Ellen G. White, *The Spirit of Prophecy* (Battle Creek, Mich.: Seventh-day Adventist Pub. Assn., 1878), vol. 3, p. 94: “[Jesus’ disciples] had frequently seen him depressed, but never before so utterly sad and silent.”
9. Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1917), pp. 173, 174.
10. Ellen G. White letter 150, 1903, Ellen G. White, *In Heavenly Places* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1967), p. 120.
11. For example, see E. G. White, *Testimonies*, vol. 1, p. 185.
12. Ellen G. White, *Life Sketches of James White and Ellen G. White* (Battle Creek, Mich.: Seventh-day Adventist Pub. Assn., 1880), p. 135.
13. Ellen G. White letter 147, 1904, in E. G. White, *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 1, pp. 255, 256; Ellen G. White, in *Signs of the Times*, Dec. 30, 1903.
14. Ellen G. White letter 7, 1892, in Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1958, 1980), book 2, pp. 242, 243.
15. Ellen G. White, in *Signs of the Times*, July 25, 1895.

Tim Poirier is vice director of the Ellen G. White Estate in Silver Spring, Maryland. He and his wife, Merle, have two daughters and one grandson. This article originally appeared in the January 3, 2017, issue of the Adventist Review.

ARE YOU
A LOCAL
CHURCH
LEADER
WITH A
POWERFUL
STORY TO
TELL?

Revival
& REFORMATION

The Revival and Reformation initiative
of the General Conference wants
your testimony to encourage and
strengthen the global church family.

We want your story that illustrates

- Congregational revitalization through corporate prayer
- The deepening of personal spiritual experience through prayer and Bible study
- Dramatic soul winning stories that are rooted in prayer
- God's providential movements in your congregation

Inspire others and share what God is doing in your church by visiting revivalandreformation.org/share or by emailing thomasja@gc.adventist.org

KEEP IT FOCUSED! STORIES SHOULD BE ABOUT 250 WORDS / ALL MANUSCRIPTS WILL BECOME THE PROPERTY OF REVIVAL AND REFORMATION AND THE GENERAL CONFERENCE MINISTERIAL ASSOCIATION. / WE WANT TO SHARE YOUR STORY, BUT PUBLICATION IS NOT GUARANTEED