

Chapter 2

The Making of a Perfectionist (1827-1843)

Ellen Gould Harmon was born, along with her twin sister Elizabeth, to Robert and Eunice Harmon on November 26, 1827, in the little village of Gorham, Maine. Ellen descended from a long line of devout and conservative Christians, many of whom were Puritans.¹ Ellen Harmon's genealogical chart reveals numerous ancestors who were born in the Massachusetts Bay Colony during the 17th century, the heyday of New England Puritanism.²

Puritan values and ideals would have been deeply ingrained in Ellen's 17th century ancestors, only three generations removed from Ellen's own parents. Even though New England Puritanism soon transformed into the Congregationalist denomination, traditional Puritan values persisted in New England for many years, profoundly influencing young Ellen's outlook and impacting her adult beliefs, even though she was raised in the Methodist Church. Before her birth, Ellen's father Robert broke from Puritanism/Congregationalism and became a Methodist.³

Several incidents show that the young Ellen was a thoughtful, intelligent, and tender-hearted girl. One method of gathering nuts in those days was to search for stashes hidden by squirrels. Ellen felt bad about robbing the squirrels, so she would carefully replace their hickory nuts with an offering of dried corn.⁴

On another occasion, Ellen was sent to bring in the family cow for milking. She discovered the cow stuck in the mud in the middle of a creek running through the woods. With darkness approaching, little Ellen developed an ingenious plan. Plucking some grass from the bank, she offered it to the cow. She held the next handful of grass just out of the cow's reach, and the cow exerted a mighty effort to obtain the tasty treat. After repeating the process several

¹Certainly one of the most dramatic developments in Ellen Harmon's ancestry was the conversion of _____ Harmon to the Puritan faith. Puritans, who wanted to purify the Church of England from all vestiges of Catholicism, faced persecution from the established national church. Harmon was sent to spy on Puritan worship services, in _____, England, but he became distracted by a lovely young woman. Their acquaintance blossomed into a romance, and Harmon converted to Puritanism. After his conversion, _____ agreed to marry him.

²"Ancestral Chart for Ellen Gould Harmon White." Washington: Ellen G. White Estate, n.d. Ancestors from the Puritan era include the following great-great-grandparents of Ellen Harmon: John and Sarah Harmon; George and Alice Simpson; Samuel and Hannah York; John and Sarah Giddings; John and Elizabeth Skillings; Andrew and Deborah Haley; John and Mary Gold (later changed to Gould, Ellen's mother's maiden name); William and Christian Furbish; Joshua and Ann Remick; Joseph and Susannah Hill; Percival and Mary Lowell; John and Mary Swett; John and Mary Purington; and Joseph and Mary Jones (two couples aren't known). During Puritan times, church membership was an exclusive privilege reserved for members of the community who met the highest standard of approval, or whose financial means were such that their neighbors assumed that God was richly blessing them. Others were required to attend church and obey the political/ecclesiastical rules of Puritanism, but they weren't officially members. We can be certain that some of Ellen Harmon's ancestors were church members and that some were not. However, we can generically refer to her 17th century ancestors as Puritans because they would have all been attending Puritan meetinghouses and obeying Puritan codes of conduct.

³White, Arthur L. *Ellen G. White*. Vol. 1. Washington: Review & Herald, 1985. 6 vols. 18.

⁴White, Arthur L. *Ellen G. White*. Vol. 1. Washington: Review & Herald, 1985. 6 vols. 20.

times, Ellen successfully induced the cow to free herself from the mud.⁵

Ellen's intelligent sensitivity was also evident at school. One day, her teacher became enraged with the girl sitting next to Ellen. He threw his ruler at the offender, but it struck Ellen, opening a large gash on her forehead. As Ellen White later recalled, her horrified teacher begged, "Ellen, I made a mistake; won't you forgive me?"

Said I, "Certainly I will; but where is the mistake?"

"I did not mean to hit you."

"But," said I, "it is a mistake that you should hit anybody. I would just as soon have this gash in my forehead as to have another injured."⁶

The Harmon family moved to Portland, Maine, in the early 1830's, where Robert was better able to pursue his business as a hatter.⁷ Ellen assisted her father in his hat-making, learning to fashion crowns for hats.⁸ She later recalled that she was viewed as an integral part of the family "firm," and that "there was no idleness in my home, and there was no disobedience there that was not taken in hand at once."⁹

Arthur White indicates that the prime years of Ellen's schooling were from 1833 to 1837, during which time she attended the Brackett Street School in Portland.¹⁰ Ellen was a bright student who was often called upon to read the lessons to her classmates, and she was soon promoted to the group of more advanced students.¹¹ Public schooling in those days was very religious in nature, and Ellen read many books about children who appeared to have attained Christian perfection. She would often say to herself, "If that is true, I can never be a Christian. I can never hope to be like those children."¹²

In 1837, at the age of nine, Ellen's life would change dramatically. Ellen and her twin sister Elizabeth were walking home from school with a friend, when an older girl with a stone in her hand began shouting threats against them. The younger girls began running home. As Ellen later recalled,

"I turned to see how far she was behind me, and as I turned, the stone hit me on my nose. When I revived, I found myself in a merchant's store, the blood streaming from my nose, my garments covered in blood, and a large stream of blood on the floor.

⁵White, Arthur L. *Ellen G. White*. Vol. 1. Washington: Review & Herald, 1985. 6 vols. 20.

⁶Qtd. in White, Arthur L. *Ellen G. White*. Vol. 1. Washington: Review & Herald, 1985. 6 vols. 21.

⁷White, Arthur L. *Ellen G. White*. Vol. 1. Washington: Review & Herald, 1985. 6 vols. 22.

⁸White, Arthur L. *Ellen G. White*. Vol. 1. Washington: Review & Herald, 1985. 6 vols. 24-25.

⁹Qtd. in White, Arthur L. *Ellen G. White*. Vol. 1. Washington: Review & Herald, 1985. 6 vols. 21.

¹⁰White, Arthur L. *Ellen G. White*. Vol. 1. Washington: Review & Herald, 1985. 6 vols. 25.

¹¹White, Arthur L. *Ellen G. White*. Vol. 1. Washington: Review & Herald, 1985. 6 vols. 25.

¹²Qtd. in White, Arthur L. *Ellen G. White*. Vol. 1. Washington: Review & Herald, 1985. 6 vols. 26.

"A kind stranger offered to take me home in his carriage. I knew not how weak I was, and told him I should greatly soil his carriage with blood My twin sister and my schoolmate carried me home. I have no recollection of anything for some time after the accident. My mother says that I noticed nothing, but lay in a stupid state for three weeks. No one thought I would live except my mother."¹³

When Ellen regained consciousness, the pitying looks and comments cast upon her by visitors prompted her to request a mirror. She recalled, ". . . I was shocked at the change in my appearance. Every feature of my face seemed changed. The sight was more than I could bear. . . . The idea of carrying my misfortune through life was insupportable. . . . I did not wish to live, and I dared not die, for I was not prepared."¹⁴ Even after her return to consciousness, the doctors predicted that Ellen would soon die. She records lying in a large cradle that had been made for her, having been "reduced almost to a skeleton."¹⁵

At the time of Ellen's injury, Robert Harmon had been on a business trip selling hats in Georgia. When he returned home, he greeted all his children, then asked for Ellen. "I was pointed out by my mother; but my father did not know me. It was hard to make him believe that I was his Ellen. This cut me to the heart"¹⁶

Ellen longed to further her education, but her physical condition made this dream a practical impossibility. She wrote,

"My health was so poor that I could attend school but little. It was almost impossible for me to study, and retain what I learned.

"The same girl who was the cause of my misfortune, was appointed by our teacher as a monitor to assist me in writing, and to aid me in getting my lessons. She always seemed sorry for what she had done, and I was careful not to remind her of the great injury she had done me. She was tender and patient with me, and much of her time seemed sad and thoughtful, as she saw me laboring to get an education. My hand trembled so that I made no progress in writing, and could get no further than the first examples As I labored to bend my mind to my studies, the letters of my book would run together, large drops of perspiration would stand upon my brow, and I would become dizzy and faint."¹⁷

¹³White, Ellen G. *Spiritual Gifts*. Vol. 2. Battle Creek: James White, 1860. 7-8. Several friends advised a lawsuit against the family of the girl who had caused Ellen's injury, but the Harmons graciously declined to pursue legal action.

¹⁴White, Ellen G. *Spiritual Gifts*. Vol. 2. Battle Creek: James White, 1860. 9.

¹⁵White, Ellen G. *Christian Experiences and Teachings of Ellen G. White*. Vol. 1. Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1940. 14.

¹⁶White, Ellen G. *Spiritual Gifts*. Vol. 2. Battle Creek: James White, 1860. 10.

¹⁷White, Ellen G. *Spiritual Gifts*. Vol. 2. Battle Creek: James White, 1860. 11, 12.

Due to lack of progress, her teachers finally advised her to drop out of school, so she did. Her only other formal schooling was a brief stint at a female seminary when she was twelve.¹⁸

From March 11-23, 1840, Ellen Harmon heard William Miller preach several sermons on the soon-coming of Jesus at the Christian Church on Casco Street in Portland, Maine.¹⁹ Miller was a self-taught preacher and theologian, a former deist who began questioning his belief after the Battle of Plattsburgh during the War of 1812.²⁰ A captain in the U.S. Army, Miller had expected to be routed and possibly killed by the superior British force. Instead, the British suddenly retreated, leaving the stunned Americans victorious. Miller wondered if God had intervened, a conclusion antithetical to deistic belief.²¹ Miller's conversion to Christianity became complete in 1816 when he broke down while reading a sermon from *Proudfoot's Practical Sermons* from the pulpit of the Low Hampton Baptist Church.²²

After his conversion, Miller embarked on an intense program of Bible study. He determined to answer all objections using only the margin references and his concordance.²³ During his study, he became convinced that Daniel 8:14 identified 1843 as the year of Christ's return: "Unto two thousand and three hundred days; then shall the sanctuary be cleansed." Like many theologians, Miller believed that a day in Bible prophecy equals a year. Starting with the decree to rebuild the temple, issued by the Persian King Artaxerxes in 457 B.C., Miller calculated that the 2300 years would end in 1843, at which time Christ would cleanse the sanctuary (earth).²⁴

Amazed by his new understanding and stunned by the implications, Miller studied quietly, revealing his findings to no one until 1831. In an agony of indecision, Miller finally promised God that he would share his views if he was invited to preach somewhere. An invitation arrived that very day.²⁵

¹⁸White, Ellen G. *Spiritual Gifts*. Vol. 2. Battle Creek: James White, 1860. 14.

¹⁹White, Ellen G. *Christian Experiences and Teachings of Ellen G. White*. Vol. 1. Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1940. 16.; White, Arthur L. *Ellen G. White*. Vol. 1. Washington: Review & Herald, 1985. 6 vols. 34.; Dick, Everett N. *William Miller and the Advent Crisis*. Berrien Springs: Andrews UP, 1994. 12. Some of her early autobiographical writings mistakenly identify the year as 1839. White, Arthur L. *Ellen G. White*. Vol. 1. Washington: Review & Herald, 1985. 6 vols. 34.

²⁰The Battle of Plattsburgh took place in upstate New York in September of 1814. Fifteen hundred American soldiers and a few thousand volunteers defeated fifteen thousand British troops. Miller wrote, "At the commencement of the Battle, we looked upon our defeat as almost certain, and yet we were victorious. *So surprising a result against such odds, did seem to me like the work of a mightier power than man.*" Qtd. in Knight, George R. *Millennial Fever and the End of the World: A Study of Millerite Adventism*. Boise: Pacific Press, 1993. 32.

²¹Deists believe in an impersonal God who set the world in motion and then abandoned it to the laws of science and to random happenstance.

²²Knight, George R. *Millennial Fever and the End of the World: A Study of Millerite Adventism*. Boise: Pacific Press, 1993. 33, 34.

²³Dick, Everett N. *William Miller and the Advent Crisis*. Berrien Springs: Andrews UP, 1994. 6.

²⁴Dick, Everett N. *William Miller and the Advent Crisis*. Berrien Springs: Andrews UP, 1994. 7, 8.

²⁵Dick, Everett N. *William Miller and the Advent Crisis*. Berrien Springs: Andrews UP, 1994. 9.

Miller's preaching created a sensation in Portland in March of 1840. As Everett N. Dick discovered, "Rumsellers turned their shops into meeting rooms and these places, once the scene of drunkenness and revelry, were devoted to prayer and praise."²⁶ The Bible became an overnight bestseller, and people set aside denominational prejudice to study and pray together.²⁷ Twelve-year-old Ellen Harmon answered Miller's call to repentance. She recalled,

"... I, among the rest, pressed through the crowd and took my place with the seekers. But there was in my heart a feeling that I could never become worthy to be called a child of God. I had often sought for the peace there is in Christ, but I could not seem to find the freedom I desired. A terrible sadness rested on my heart. I could not think of anything I had done to cause me to feel sad; but it seemed to me that I was not good enough to enter heaven, that such a thing would be altogether too much for me to expect."²⁸

Ellen found temporary peace with God at a Methodist campmeeting in Buxton, Maine, in 1842.²⁹ She proceeded to request baptism by immersion, and on June 26, 1842, she was immersed in the waters of Casco Bay.³⁰ "It was a very windy day," she recalled. "The waves ran high, and dashed upon the shore; but my peace was like a river. When I arose out of the water, my strength was nearly gone, for the power of God rested upon me. . . . I felt dead to the world, and that my sins were all washed away."³¹ Her happiness was short-lived.

"The same day a sister and I were taken into the church [formally accepted into membership]. I felt happy, till I looked at the sister by my side, and saw gold rings on her fingers, and large gold ear-rings in her ears. Her bonnet was filled with artificial flowers, and was trimmed with costly ribbon, which was filled with bows upon her bonnet. My heart felt sad. I expected every moment a reproof from the minister; but none came. He took us both into the church. . . . For some time I was in deep trial, and finally concluded that if it was so sinful as I had thought it to be to dress like the world, those whom I looked up to as being devoted christians [sic], and older in experience than myself, would feel it, and would deal plainly with those who went contrary to God's word. But I knew that I must be

²⁶Dick, Everett N. *William Miller and the Advent Crisis*. Berrien Springs: Andrews UP, 1994. 12.

²⁷Dick, Everett N. *William Miller and the Advent Crisis*. Berrien Springs: Andrews UP, 1994. 13.

²⁸White, Ellen G. *Christian Experiences and Teachings of Ellen G. White*. Vol. 1. Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1940. 16, 17.

²⁹White, Ellen G. *Christian Experiences and Teachings of Ellen G. White*. Vol. 1. Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1940. 17-20. For the date, see White, Arthur L. *Ellen G. White*. Vol. 1. Washington: Review & Herald, 1985. 6 vols. 36.

³⁰White, Arthur L. *Ellen G. White*. Vol. 1. Washington: Review & Herald, 1985. 6 vols. 37.

³¹White, Ellen G. *Spiritual Gifts*. Vol. 2. Battle Creek: James White, 1860. 13.

plain in my dress. I believed it to be wicked to think so much of appearance, to decorate our poor mortal bodies with flowers and gold.”³²

At this time, Ellen briefly attended a female seminary, but she found it “almost impossible to enjoy religion” in a place that was “surrounded with so many influences calculated to lead the mind from God”³³ Her spiritual despair led her to withdraw from school.

Even though Ellen was newly baptized, her spiritual struggles intensified. Her views on the difficulty of sanctification, coupled with the horrors of hell for those who failed to achieve sanctification, kept her in a state of spiritual panic.

“In my mind the justice of God eclipsed His mercy and love. I had been taught to believe in an eternally burning hell, and the horrifying thought was ever before me that my sins were too great to be forgiven, and that I should be forever lost. . . . Ministers in the pulpit drew vivid pictures of the condition of the lost. They taught that God proposed to save none but the sanctified. . . .

“Satan was represented as eager to seize upon his prey and bear us to the lowest depths of anguish, there to exult over our sufferings in the horrors of an eternally burning hell, where, after the tortures of thousands upon thousands of years, the fiery billows would roll to the surface the writhing victims, who would shriek: ‘How long, O Lord, how long?’ Then the answer would thunder down the abyss: ‘Through all eternity!’ Again the molten waves would engulf the lost

“While listening to these terrible descriptions, my imagination would be so wrought upon that the perspiration would start, and it was difficult to suppress a cry of anguish”³⁴

Since Ellen hated to see any creature hurt, she could not love and respect a God who “delighted in the torture of His creatures”³⁵ In this light, God seemed “cruel and tyrannical,” and she feared she would lose her reason.”³⁶ Adventist theologian Alden Thompson observes that “Ellen White was headed for insanity” as a result of her spiritual despair.³⁷

Ellen Harmon was extremely shy and reserved, possibly as a result of lingering psychological scars from the attack that marred her face.³⁸ Her spiritual struggles also contributed

³²White, Ellen G. *Spiritual Gifts*. Vol. 2. Battle Creek: James White, 1860. 13, 14.

³³White, Ellen G. *Spiritual Gifts*. Vol. 2. Battle Creek: James White, 1860. 14.

³⁴White, Ellen G. *Testimonies for the Church*. Vol. 1. Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1948. 24.

³⁵White, Ellen G. *Testimonies for the Church*. Vol. 1. Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1948. 25.

³⁶White, Ellen G. *Testimonies for the Church*. Vol. 1. Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1948. 25.

³⁷Thompson, Alden. *Escape from the Flames*. Nampa: Pacific Press, 2005. 75.

³⁸White, Ellen G. *Spiritual Gifts*. Vol. 2. Battle Creek: James White, 1860. 10, 11.

to her social reticence.³⁹ Ellen had never prayed publicly, even though she regularly attended prayer meetings. She became convinced that her fear of praying publicly was a matter of pride, lest she might stumble over her words. She felt it her Christian duty to pray publicly, as if her salvation hung upon that one point.⁴⁰ For three weeks, she agonized over the matter:

“My sufferings of mind were intense. Sometimes for a whole night I would not dare to close my eyes, but would wait until my twin sister was fast asleep, then quietly leave my bed and kneel upon the floor, praying silently, with a dumb agony that cannot be described. The horrors of an eternally burning hell were ever before me. I knew that it was impossible for me to live long in this state, and I dared not die and meet the terrible fate of the sinner. With what envy did I regard those who realized their acceptance with God! How precious did the Christian’s hope seem to my agonized soul!

“I frequently remained bowed in prayer nearly all night, groaning and trembling with inexpressible anguish, and a hopelessness that passes all description.”⁴¹

In this condition, she received a vision that was so vivid and left her so shaken that she saw fit to record it in detail:

“I dreamed that there was a temple to which many people were flocking, and all who would be saved when time should close must be within that temple. And all who were outside the temple would be lost. As I looked upon the people going to the temple, I saw the multitude laughing at and deriding them, telling them that it was all a deception. . . .

“I was afraid of being laughed at and ridiculed, and thought I would wait until the multitude were dispersed, or until I could go in some way that they would not know where I was going. My mind was troubled lest I should be too late, and the multitude was increasing instead of lessening. I hastily left my home and pressed through the crowd. I was in such haste that I did not notice the throng. I feared I was too late. I entered the building, and what a sight met my eyes! The temple was supported by one immense pillar, and to this pillar was a lamb tied, all mangled and bleeding. I thought that we all knew that it was our sins that caused this lamb to be thus torn and bruised. Just before this lamb were seats elevated above the level of the floor, and a company of people were sitting there looking very happy. All who entered the temple must come before the lamb and confess their sins, and then take their place among the happy throng who occupied the

³⁹White, Ellen G. *Christian Experiences and Teachings of Ellen G. White*. Vol. 1. Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1940. 17.

⁴⁰White, Ellen G. *Spiritual Gifts*. Vol. 2. Battle Creek: James White, 1860. 15, 16.

⁴¹White, Ellen G. *Christian Experiences and Teachings of Ellen G. White*. Vol. 1. Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1940. 24.

elevated seats. Even while in the building a fear came over me and shame to have them all looking upon me. I was slowly making my way around the pillar to face the lamb, when the trumpet sounded, and the building shook, and shouts of triumph went up from the saints in that building. The temple seemed to shine with awful brightness, and then all was dark, terrible dark. Those who had seemed so happy were gone, and I left alone in the place in complete darkness. The horror of my mind could not be described. I awoke, and it was some time before I could convince myself it was not a reality. Surely, thought I, my doom is fixed, I have slighted mercy, and grieved the Spirit of the Lord away, never more to return.”⁴²

Fortunately, Ellen soon had another dream that restored her hope. In the second dream, she climbed a staircase that led to heaven, carefully obeying the command of her guide to avoid looking down. Jesus was at the top of the stairs; He smiled and said, “Fear not.” Ellen recalled, “His presence filled me with such holy awe that I could not endure it.” She was then given a green chord which would enable her to see Jesus provided that she would keep it close to her heart and use it often.⁴³

After this dream, Ellen revealed her spiritual struggles to her mother, who sent her to visit Elder Stockman, a Methodist preacher of Millerite persuasion. Stockman assured Ellen that her inner turmoil indicated that the Holy Spirit was working in her heart. She was not lost. He added that her youth, combined with her deep spiritual yearnings, signified a special divine plan for her life.⁴⁴ That night, she succeeded in praying publicly.

“As I prayed the burden and agony of soul that I had so long felt left me, and the blessing of God came upon me like the gentle dew, and I gave glory to God for what I felt. Everything was shut out from me but Jesus and glory, and I knew nothing of what was passing around me.

“I remained in this state a long time”⁴⁵

In fact, her spiritual ecstasy from this victory lasted six months, during which time, “not a shadow clouded my mind, nor did I neglect one known duty.”⁴⁶

One day, Ellen heard her mother discussing a recent sermon she had heard on the non-immortality of the soul. Ellen later questioned her mother on the subject, and Eunice Harmon affirmed her new belief that the soul is not naturally immortal and that hell, therefore, doesn’t burn forever. Ellen exclaimed, “If you believe this strange theory, do not let anyone know of it; for I

⁴²White, Ellen G. *Spiritual Gifts*. Vol. 2. Battle Creek: James White, 1860. 16-18.

⁴³White, Ellen G. *Spiritual Gifts*. Vol. 2. Battle Creek: James White, 1860. 18-20.

⁴⁴White, Ellen G. *Testimonies for the Church*. Vol. 1. Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1948. 29, 30.

⁴⁵White, Ellen G. *Spiritual Gifts*. Vol. 2. Battle Creek: James White, 1860. 20.

⁴⁶White, Ellen G. *Christian Experiences and Teachings of Ellen G. White*. Vol. 1. Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1940. 24.

fear that sinners would gather security from this belief, and never desire to seek the Lord.”

“If this is sound Bible truth,” [Mrs. Harmon] replied, “instead of preventing the salvation of sinners, it will be the means of winning them to Christ.”⁴⁷

As the Millerite movement expanded in numbers and grew in fervor, opposition from the established churches intensified. The Harmons were comfortable as staunch Methodists and Millerites, but they were forced to choose between the two in 1843, the year of the predicted second advent of Christ. Non-Millerite Methodists were anticipating a millennium of peace and blessings before the Lord should come, and this contrasted sharply with Miller’s premillennialism. As a result, the Harmons were disfellowshipped from the Chestnutt Street Methodist Church in September 1843.⁴⁸

As the anticipated advent neared, Ellen began sharing her testimony as often as she could. Her crippling shyness seemed to melt away in the excitement of feeling God’s acceptance. Of her experience speaking and praying in various meetings, she stated,

“At times the Spirit of the Lord rested upon me in such power that my strength was taken away. This was a trial to some of those who had come out from the formal churches, and often words were spoken meant for my ear, which grieved me. They did not believe that any one could be so filled with the Spirit of the Lord as to lose their strength. I began to fear. I reasoned thus: Am I not justified in holding my peace in meeting, and restraining my feelings, when my testimony causes such opposition, even in meeting, and in the hearts of some of those older in experience, and in years, than myself?”⁴⁹

Her holy boldness, accompanied by supernatural manifestations, were distinct foreshadowings of what was to come.

Evaluation

Ellen Harmon was a good-hearted, sincere girl in desperate need of divine affirmation, or else she was headed for a complete emotional and physical breakdown. Her fears of hell, her perfectionism, and her belief in an arbitrary God, combined with her belief in Christ’s imminent return in 1843, would soon have broken her frail body and spirit.

Ellen was the victim of an unfortunate combination of Puritan legalism and Methodist perfectionism. Puritans believed in predestination, which means that God has pre-selected certain souls to receive grace before they are born. One who receives grace will be irresistibly drawn to God, while the door of salvation is irrevocably closed against one who hasn’t received grace. No amount of spiritual struggle will result in salvation for those not selected for grace. Furthermore, Puritans believed that it is impossible to know whether one was under grace, so a good Puritan would never say, “I am saved.” Instead, he or she would say, “I hope to have received God’s grace.” Puritans’ hope of heaven hung “by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it,” as later depicted by Congregationalist minister Jonathan Edwards in his famous

⁴⁷White, Ellen G. *Christian Experiences and Teachings of Ellen G. White*. Vol. 1. Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1940. 40.

⁴⁸White, Arthur L. *Ellen G. White*. Vol. 1. Washington: Review & Herald, 1985. 6 vols. 44.

⁴⁹White, Ellen G. *Spiritual Gifts*. Vol. 2. Battle Creek: James White, 1860. 26.

sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” One of the few hopes to which they could cling was that their ability to perform good works *might* be a sign that they had received grace, so most Puritans placed an unhealthy, legalistic emphasis on works.

While the Harmons rejected predestination, the unbalanced Puritan emphasis on law and works was still influential during Ellen’s childhood, resulting in her despairing sense of spiritual inadequacy. The mature Ellen White rejected predestination and the doctrine of an eternally burning hellfire, but she clung to other Puritan beliefs. A faint echo of Ellen’s Puritan uncertainty is her declaration that it is presumptuous to say, “I am saved.” Other Puritan views that Ellen White retained include the prohibition against jewelry and fancy clothing styles, a deep suspicion of worldly entertainment, a belief that a simple diet would assist in the quest for godliness, and a belief in hard work and the spiritual value of using every moment wisely.

Methodism was another source of Ellen’s uncertainty. John Wesley, the leading figure of early Methodism, taught a doctrine of perfection that Ellen and her family may have misunderstood. In Wesley’s defense, he relied upon the teachings of Jesus: “Therefore be ye perfect even as your father in heaven is perfect.” The Western mind is more literalistic than the ancient Hebrew minds for whom the Bible was originally written. Jesus was indicating a striving rather than an absolute attaining, for fallen human beings can never dream of reaching perfection on par with God Himself. Wesley attempted to qualify his perfectionism, asserting that he didn’t mean an absolute and utter perfection, but the damage was done. Ellen Harmon would not have understood the nuances in Wesley’s teachings that could have led to a more healthy spiritual walk. Wesley, and later Ellen White, using Western literalism, would attempt to honor the biblical mandate of perfection, not realizing that the original hearers would not have interpreted Christ’s words so strictly.

The Puritans did not emphasize perfection because they were saved by grace. Their legalism was simply a searching for evidence of divine approval. Puritans sought salvation by grace in theory, legalism in practice. Wesley, on the other hand, didn’t emphasize the legalistic Puritans’ long list of sinful activities. His perfection was more relational in nature. Sadly, Ellen Harmon, not understanding the theological nuances of either belief system, combined Puritan legalism and Wesleyan perfectionism, with nearly devastating results for her well-being.

An early example of this tragic confluence of belief systems was the day of her baptism and acceptance into the Methodist Church. On what should have been a joyous occasion, Ellen was thrown into misery by another convert who was wearing jewelry and fake flowers, along with expensive ribbons and bows. Instead of focusing her mind on God, fourteen-year-old Ellen’s day was ruined, as we can particularly see from her inclusion of this event in her life story. “I believed it to be wicked to think so much of appearance, to decorate our poor mortal bodies with flowers and gold.”⁵⁰ Jewelry was a sin in the eyes of Puritan legalists and in the eyes of the young Ellen. Obviously, in her youthful mind, this woman had not achieved anything close to perfection, so she had no business being admitted to the church. This incident shows Ellen’s childhood judgmental propensities, probably stemming from the teachings of her home. When she later became a spiritual leader, she dealt plainly with the erring, always with a vision to back her up. But she possessed these critical impulses prior to her prophetic ministry.

Among those who discredit Ellen’s later claims of inspiration, a great deal of speculation circulates about the impact of her head injury. Some believe that the apparent supernatural

⁵⁰White, Ellen G. *Spiritual Gifts*. Vol. 2. Battle Creek: James White, 1860. 14.

phenomena associated with her visions are attributable to the effects of her head injury. Specifically, some doctors call her visions cataleptic seizures. Cataleptic seizures can be caused by head injuries. According to this view, her visions are unusual, but explainable as normal phenomena. It is not the burden of this book to explain the visions she would subsequently receive. We will evaluate the visions on the basis of scripture. They must be of God, of the devil, or subject to natural explanation. I favor a natural explanation, but the reader must ultimately decide.

A piece of evidence in favor of a natural explanation is her ability is her ability to have vivid, symbolic dreams as a child. Her dream of the lamb supporting the main pillar of the temple involved brilliant symbolism, but it was not inspired by the loving God we know. God would not torment a child, particularly a child who was pleading night and day for salvation, by giving her a vision indicating that she was just a little too late to be saved. Ellen never claimed that this dream was from the Lord, but it does show that her mind was capable of manufacturing impressive symbolism that would leave a most vivid impression.

In her youth, Ellen Harmon became an ultra-perfectionist through Puritan, Methodist, and family influences. She was brought to the brink of despair, and possibly to the brink of madness. As we move on, we will evaluate whether her visions corrected her strict theology, or whether her visions merely confirmed her personal acceptance with the Lord, leaving her perfectionism largely intact as a dubious legacy to her followers.