ELLEN GOULD WHITE EARLY YEARS CHALLENGES: A LESSON FOR CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIANS

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1.0 Introduction

Issues related to the handling of difficulty and painful situations (misfortunes, trials, problems or tribulations...) have been a challenge to mankind throughout the ages. What is observable, however, is that some people are able to take the hard knocks and remain standing after a few staggering steps. Others, on the contrary, completely knuckle under the problem, unable to pick themselves up again¹.

Though misfortune is no respecter of persons², but it becomes a thing of concern when it happen in early years of one's life. A careful analysis of Ellen G. White's early life gave insightful evidence to the factor of faith in remolding a devastated childhood³.

According to Arnold Gesell and Frances L. Ilg; the years from five to ten occupy an important position to the scheme of human development. Every child is born with potentialities which are peculiar to him or her. Each child has a unique pattern of growth, determined by their potentialities, and by environmental fate⁴.

¹ E. I. Eze, God's unchanging word (Lagos: Pine Studios limited, 2009),124.

² S. Koranteng-Pipim in his book patience in the midst of trials and affliction posits that suffering is no respecter of persons. The rich and the poor, educated and uneducated, powerful and powerless, male and female, young and old, Christian and non-Christian-all suffer. Ever since Adam and Eve introduced sin into the world, suffering has been an inescapable reality of lire. Every human being, at one time or the other, is bound to experience pain, disappointment, sorrow, grief, loss, or some other form of suffering. When that happens the inevitable question that comes to mind is "why?"

³ When convinced she was dying, 9-year-old Ellen began to pray that the Lord would prepare her to die, this struggle led her to a deep faith in the Lord as a result she felt peace of mind

⁴ Arnold Gesell and Frances L. Ilg, The child from five to ten (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1946)

A reflection of a quote from Jeffrey and Pattiejean Brown; capture the same sentiment when it says "Your childhood early years can be thought of as winter. Those early years are special. Pay great attention to them. You can't always see what's going on, but character is being armed. Those early years are the most important years of all¹.

Though the above concept is favourally accepted, the question still remains, Do early years (or childhood) challenge have influence on adult life? What should be done when a misfortune befell in early years of life? What are the factors that lead to breakthrough in trying, painful and suffering period like this? How best can life challenges wave off if supported by close relations?

In an attempt to provide answers to the above questions, an analysis of the life of Ellen G. White shall be considered; the impact of the misfortune on her position to the situation that befell her, how best the family is healing the situation and the implication for the contemporary Christians.

This study will review the impact of misfortune in early years of E. G White and implication for contemporary Christians. The second section surveys brief historical background to the study. The third section sheds light on the extent of the accident. The fourth section examines the contemporary life challenges, lessons for contemporary Christians and conclusion.

2.0 Brief Historical Background

Ellen, with her twin sister Elizabeth, was born November 26, 1827 to Robert and Eunice Harmon. With eight children in the family, home was an interesting and busy place.

¹ Jeffrey and Pattiejean Brown, A guide to Parenting (Grantham, Lincs.: the Stanborough Press, 2003), 19

The family lived on a small farm near the village of Gorham, Marine, in the northeastern part of the United States. However, a few years after the birth of the twins, Robert Harmon gave up farming and, with his family, moved into the city of Portland, about, twelve miles east¹.

While narrating her childhood misfortune, she said, "while I was but a child, my parents removed from Gorham to Portland, Marine here, at the age of nine years, an accident happened to me which was to affect my whole life. In company with my twin sister and one of our schoolmates, I was crossing a common in the city of Portland, when a girl about thirteen years of age, becoming angry at some trifle, threw a stone that hit me on the nose. I was stunned by the blow, and fell senseless to the ground"²

Though those present at the scene of accident do not see the injury to be so serious, but she could only walk a few rods, before becoming faint and dizzy. In short, this was the beginning of the dilemma and the misfortune that befell her at age nine!

3.0 Results of the Accident

Jerry Moon³ characterized the effect of the accident into five categories,

- i. Physical Results of the Accident
- ii. Loss of Physical Attractiveness
- iii. Loss of Social Acceptance/ Friends
- iv. Loss of Hope For an Education

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¹ Arthur L. White, "a brief biography of Ellen G. White", http www whiteestate org (22 October 2013).

² E. G. White, life sketches of Ellen G. White, (1915) 17.

³ Jerry Moon,GSEM 534 lecture outline, Ellen Gould Harmon to Age Sixteen, www.andrews.edu/~Jmoon/documents/GSEM 534/class outline/01.pdf, (9 January 2013). 3

v. Loss of Any Expectation For a Normal life

This will form the basis for discussion

3.1 Physical Results of the Accident

There was extensive loss of blood due to nose broken as a result of the hit of the stone¹. In her book, Life Sketches, she said, "My mother said that I noticed nothing, but lay in a stupor for three weeks....A great cradle had been made for me, and in it I lay for many weeks. I was reduced almost to a skeleton". She further said "when Christian friends visited the family, they would ask my mother if she had talked with me about dying"². No one but her mother alone thought it possible for her to survive it. To her "my health seemed to be hopelessly impaired. For two years, I could not breathe through my nose"³. Her nervous system was prostrated, hand trembled and writing and reading difficulty. She had a bad cough, and her whole system seemed desolated.

A sicky child like her to survive the environmental challenges of her time is miraculous; Because in her time, as today, the summer were proverbially pleasant, winters harsh, with temperatures often below zero, even to a record 24 degrees Fahrenheit below zero (February 1, 1826). The harbor was often frozen for days, even weeks, while the countryside usually covered with snow, made travel by sleigh ideal.... Because Portland did not have a hospital until 1855, the sick were cared for at home or in the physician's office; By far, the most common cause of death was consumption (tuberculosis) and over

¹ Herbert E. Douglass, Messenger of the Lord, (Pacific Press Publishing Association, 3rd Ed 1998), 48

² E. G. White, life sketches, 18

³ Ibid, 18

50 percent of death recorded in a year (not counting the still born) were the young; those under 10¹. Even at Sixteen Ellen G white also suffered tuberculosis².

3.2 Loss of Physical Attractiveness

For a young girl going into puberty stage, beauty and attraction is of necessity. In case of Ellen G. White, her mates deserted her because of her look, she lamented, "I was forced to learn the bitter lesson that our personal appearance often makes a difference in the treatment we receive from our companions". She was reduced almost to a skeleton. Her own father couldn't recognize her after returning from a business trip; on taking a courage for the first time to look in the mirror, she said "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 bone of my nose proved to be broken. The idea of carrying my misfortune through life was insupportable. I could see no pleasure in my life. Jerry Moon, posit that during her teen years, when physical attractiveness was a major factor in social relationships; Ellen was pale, sickly, extremely under weight, and not considered attractive by her peers.

¹ H. E. Douglass, 45

² Jerry Moon, Ellen Gould Harmon to Age Sixteen, 3

³ E. G. White, Life Sketches, 18

⁴ E. G. White, Spiritual Gifts, vol 2, 8-9.

⁵ Jerry Moon, 3

3.3 **Loss of Social Acceptance**

Her pale, sickly, extremely underweight makes her less attractive by her peers; Hence, this makes her socially unacceptable. In her words, "I was forced to learn this bitter lesson, that looks make a difference in the feelings of many" she conclude by saying "How changeable the friendship of my young companions. A pretty face, dress or good looks, are thought much of but let misfortune take some of these away, and the friendship is broken". In such a situation, if not for her religious background, suicide could have been an option to end up her life. A lot of suicide victims are more sociological than presumed psychological. Our society had more impact on our life.

3.4 **Loss of Opportunity for Education**

Education was the dream of every young child during the time of E.G White, just as now². Education is said to be the bedrock of development and to be rightly informed means to receive a right and adequate education. Though education starts from home, but for the emphasis of this paper, concentration will be on formal education.

Many weeks of bedridden gave her a setback, wrist still when she was picking up to return to class. "My health seemed to be hopelessly impaired. For two years I could not breathe through my nose, and was able to attend school but little... My nervous system was prostrated, and my head trembled so that I made but little progress in writing, and could get no farther than the simple copies in coarse hand. As I endeavoured to bend my

¹ E. G. white, Spiritual Gifts, vol 2:10-11,

² Frederick Hoyt, Ellen White's Hometown: Portland, Maine, 1827-1846, ed. Gary Land, The World of Ellen G. White (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association: 1987), 16.

mind to my studies, the letters in the page would run together, great drops of perspiration would stand upon my brow, and a faintness and dizziness would seize me. I had a bad cough and my whole system seemed debilitated" she lamented¹.

3.5 Loss of any expectation for normal life

The age of accident in her life was age of character formation; 'the most important years of all'². It is natural for the circumstance at this age to replicate and form the character and life at adulthood.

Considering her being pale, sickly, always fainting and bitter dissociation from the peers and seeing by the friends as dying child, the strength to carry on may be so difficult. She gave up hope of gaining an education, even her own sight in the mirror was more than what she could bear. The idea of carrying her misfortune through life was insupportable; hence, she saw no pleasure in her life.

It is obvious that the impact of misfortune in her life it's in all ramification covers all area of her life; physically, socially, mentally, emotionally even spiritually. Even though face with these misfortunes she still dare or desired to become a Christian³.

The tragedy in the life of Ellen G. White was similar to that of Job. The catalogue of catastrophe that arrayed the life of Job in Job 1 and 2 could be said to be uncalled for, because He was both "blameless and upright, and one who feared God and shunned evil" (1:1). Elmer L. Towns said, Job was a good man, a man whose moral absolutes were high,

¹ E. G. White, life sketches, 18,19.

² Jeffrey and Pettiejean Brown, 19

³ E.G.White, life sketches, 18

and a man who had a vital relationship with God whom he knew best as El Shaddai, the Almighty¹.

The desire of mankind is Excellence, to be known for brilliant successes in life, human desired to be in sound health, socially acceptable, educated (formal or skilled) and be fulfilled. These were the experience of Job twenty four hours earlier; Job was a giant success by anybody's standards. Now he had nothing but four servants who could remind him how much he had lost².

4.0 Contemporary Life Challenges

No one is immune to suffering or challenges of life. 'Every human being, at one time or the other, is bound to experience pain, disappointment, sorrow, grief, loss, or some other form of suffering.³' In agreement with this position wrote E. G White, "We are in a world of suffering. Difficult, trial and sorrow await us all along the way to the heavenly home...."and that "For every trial, God has provided help.⁴"

The experience of Horatio G. Spafford in loosing all his family members except his wife in the middle of the sea, reflected the fact that God keeps in perfect peace all who trust in him (Is 26:3). Unclouded skies and gentle minds do nothing to test our vessel of faith. It

³ Samuel Koranteng-Pipim, Patience in the midst of trials & afflictions (Ann Arbor, MI: Berean Books, 2003),7,8

¹ Elmer L. Towns, A journey through the old Testament(Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace Custom Publishers) 107-108

² Ibid, 109

⁴ E. G. White, The Ministry of Healing, 247,248

takes a storm and tempest to prove the strength of our trust in the Almighty. It would be very difficult for any of us to predict how we could react under circumstances similar to that experience by the Spaffords. But we do know that the God who sustained them would also be with us. No matter what circumstances overtake us, may we be able to say with Horatio Spafford

When peace like a river, attendeth my way,

When sorrows like sea billows roll

Whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say,

It is well, it is well with my soul¹.

An interview conducted by Ray Adams with Dr. Dayton C. K Chong, It's a story of strength in weakness, in one of his testimonies, Chung said, "As my condition steadily worsened, I heard one of the doctors say; 'He is not going to live through the night!' my wife was not with me. I was alone. And I told the Lord, 'Didn't I tell you even the doctors are ready to give up on me? I am in so much pain, why don't you just let me die tonight, and not wake up tomorrow morning?"²

Oftentimes when significant loss occurs, the bereaved persons feel that their faith has been shaken or even shattered. Religious people may find themselves questioning their entire belief structure and doubting all that has been the foundation of their past life. This, to her, would be a normal consequence of grief³.

¹ James McClelland, The Stories Behind Great Hymns (Benin City: Joint Heirs Publications, 2002), 69,70

² Roy Adams, "mission through suffering" Adventist World, October 2006, 16

³ Martha Felber, "Finding Your way after a spouse dies," (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2000), 20 quoted in Michael R. Lombardo, Grief and Faith, Ministry, July 2008, 24

Reflecting in the storm of his life, Charles A. Tapp said, "I have been reminded that sometimes God does not change our circumstances because He wants our circumstances to change us. As the words of the song so powerfully put it, "sometimes He calms the storm, and other times He calms His child".

When someone has experienced defeat and dejection, ridicule and rejection, brokenness and bareness, that person becomes more sensitive to the voice of God....Thus, the more brokenness one experiences, the more useful one can become in the hands of the Lord².

4.1 Later years of E. G White

Little will be expected of a life ravaged with misfortune like that of E. G. White! Till her death at age 87, she was not free from the effect of early year's feebleness. Because of the accident, Ellen White had less than 4 years of formal education³, yet she is thought to be "the third most translated author in the history of literature, its most translated woman writer, and the most translated American author of either sex.⁴"

She achieved all that human mind could achieve; she was a public speaker and prodigious writer, active homemaker, steadily loyal wife and warm and affectionate mother. The question remain, How could all this be when, at age nine, Physicians gave her

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¹ Charles A. Tapp, preaching through a storm: when crisis strikes the pulpit preacher, Ministry, April 2009,8

² Gilbert Vega, Broken Vessels, Ministry, march 2008, 25

³ Jerry Moon, literary assistants, 3

⁴ H. E. Douglas, 62

only months to live after the complication that followed her fateful blow on the face? Ellen White put the answer thus, on her revisited Portland and the site of her accident, and reflected in retrospect.

"This misfortune; which for a time seemed so bitter and was so hard to bear, has proved to be a blessing in disguise. The cruel blow which blighted the joys of earth was the means of turning my eyes to heaven. I might never have known Jesus, had not the sorrow that clouded my early years led me to seek comfort in him"²

Koranteng-Pipim, agreed with this sentiment when he said, "While it is sometimes difficult to classify correctly one's personal troubles, whatever their cause, suffering should drive us toward God rather than away from him"³

4.2 Reaction to Early Life Challenges

As evidenced in her life, she said, in this time of trial, we need to be encouraged and comforted by one another.... The lord has shown me that His grace is sufficient for all our trials; and although they are greater than ever before, yet we trust wholly in God, we overcome every temptation and through His grace come off victorious⁴.

Many strongly suggested that trusting in God can ease the challenges of life. As Ella Simmons rightly put it; "Trust Jesus in times of trials, trust Him in times of

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¹ Ibid., 62

² Review and Herald, November 25, 1884, paragraph 2 Quoted in Jerry Moon, Ellen G. Harmon to Age Sixteen, 6

³ Samuel Koranteng-Pipim, 9

⁴ E. G White, Early Writings (1888), 46

difficulties; trust Him in times of affliction; trust Him when we make mistakes; trust Him when we have failed; trust Him in our joy." Trusting Him is an indispensable aspect of our Hope¹.

In overcoming ups and downs of life, Don Garilva drawn factors that led to victory for Daniel as a possible solution in facing life challenges, (i) Prayer; connected Him to instant and constant source of power (ii) God's word: Anchored his faith on God's promises (iii) Witnessing: Gave him the practicum to exercise his faith².

Having trust in God and constant praying, studying the word and witnessing will help us to realize that healing or solution to our challenges is God's initiative and his gift³.

While referring to misfortune that befell her at age nine, she concluded by saying "The cruel blow which blighted the joys of earth, was the means of turning my eyes to heaven. I might never have known Jesus, had not the sorrow that clouded my early years led me to seek comfort in him⁴". This agrees with the experience of Bruce Martin when he said "by walking with pain, every minute, I am forced to be faithful. Every day I am forced to depend on God's grace and mercy. This pain has become one of God's most effective tools to keep me close and faithful to Him⁵"

¹ Ella Simmons, trust in God; Trust also in Me, in Adventist Review, 2007

² Don L. Garilva, Meeting the challenges of life, Ministry, October 2009, 24

³ Bruce Martin, pastoring in Pain: serving God when you suffer, Ministry, January 2010, 7

⁴ Review and Herald, November 25, 1884, paragraph 2 in Jerry Moon

⁵ Bruce Martin, 8

The conspicuous lesson remains, our background should not keep our back on the ground; with spiritual exercise, trusting in God and personal desire for excellence and greatness can still bring our dreams back to life. There is ability in disability.

4.3 Impact of Close relatives

It is natural no matter how irritation such a person can see his or her environment, to still have the tendency of seeking for a companion during time of trials and misfortunes is inevitable. More than often, mothers are always been the first contact in this category of companionship. Prof H.H Horne, in his idealism in education names three important forces that operate on the building of life; heredity, environment and will (personality). He said, Home environment depends upon the mother! Napoleon was once asked what France most needed. The reply of this great man who was a statesman as well as a soldier was "Mother". Lincoln was universally regarded as a self-made man, yet he said, "All that I am or hope to be I owe to my mother". When asked the secret of his success, Timothy Dwight replied, "I had the right mother". During the most impressionable years of life, the mother is the child's constant companion and almost his only teacher.

Laura E. Berk, reacting to relationship between emotions and physical health cites, 'much research indicates that emotions influence children's physical well-being.

And other studies indicate that temporary or permanent separation from a loved one depresses the immune response and is associated with a variety of health difficulties from infancy into childhood. She further to say that attachment is the strong, affectionate thing

¹ Clarence H. Benson, An Introduction to Child study (USA: Moody Press, 1942), 51

we feel in special people in our lives that leads us to feel pleasure and joy when we interact with them and to be comforted by their nearness during times of distress¹.

The most translated woman writer in the history of literature also confirms the importance of home, when she said, "home should be a place where cheerfulness, courtesy, and love abide; and where these graces dwell, there will abide happiness and peace. Troubles may invade, but these are the lot of humanity. Let patience, gratitude, and love keep sunshine in the heart, though the day may be ever so cloudy. In such homes angels of God abide². Even when her friends and neighbours saw her as ruined and her tie with social world broken, only her mother believes she will survive it. And even in the later years, the constant support of her spouse, James White, help her in an immeasurable way³.

4.4 Conclusion

To say that a deeply religious person will not face grief situation is unrealistic and emotionally unhealthy. Jesus felt free to express His grief on different occasions including weeping openly (John 11:35, Matt. 26:37). He even confided in his disciples toward the end of His life that His soul was "overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death: (Matt 26:38). He even asked for an impromptu support group when He appealed of His closest disciples to 'stay here and keep watch with me' (Matt 26:38)⁴

¹ Laura E. Berk, Child Development (USA: Allyn & Bacon, 2000), 399-401

³ Jerry Moon, Ellen G. White as an adult, 3

² E. G. White, Ministry of Healing, 393

⁴ Michael R. Lombardo, Grief and faith, Ministry, July 2008, 24

Some may look at their lives and see a lot of brokenness. Going to sleep at night is not easy because of sobbing and weeping. Many a night sleep hardly comes at all. There are visible bruises and sore spots that attest to repeated falls and spills. Life has become so broken up that hopelessness is all that's left. Life has turned out to be totally chaotic. Dreams have vanished. Wounds are deep. Grief is intense. A sense of failure pervades all around. Inner voices seem to confirm the conclusion that something that is shattered cannot be mended- it should only be discarded.

In a situation like this, simple and effective faith is needed, 'It is the work of faith to rest in God in the darkest hour, to feel, however sorely tried and tempest-tossed, that our Father is at the helm. The eye of faith alone can look beyond the things of time to estimate alright the worth of the eternal riches²'

'Our sorrows do not spring out of the ground. In every affliction God has purpose to work out for our good. Every blow that destroys an idol, every providence that weakens our hold upon earth and fastens our affections more firmly upon God, is a blessing. The pruning may be painful for a time, but afterward it 'yieldeth the peaceful fruit of righteousness³'

The early misfortune led Ellen White to six years spiritual struggles that later turned out to her conversion. As Christian living in the world of constant trials and misfortune; this situation should not be seen as end in itself but means to an end, as rightly put, 'In every trial, if we seek Him, Christ will give us help. Our eyes will be

¹ Gilbert Vega, 24

² E. G. White, the Acts of the Apostles (Coldwater, MI: Remnant, 2000), 575-576

³ E. G. White, My Life Today (1952), 93

opened to discern the healing promises recorded for His word. The Holy spirit will teach us how to appropriate every blessing that will be an antidote to grief. For every bitter draft that is placed to our lips, we shall find a branch of healing¹.

"In all our sorrow and pain, we must wait with patience for the fruition of God's character in our lives. We must not be complaining nor fretful. Neither must we be discouraged. "If perplexed, hold still; make no move in the dark... Wait, and God will help you. Be patient, and the clear light will appear".

Though Ellen was attacked by a misfortune that the idea of carrying through life was insupportable, yet she yielded her feebleness to the strength of Jesus, seeing the sore affliction that had cut her off from the triumphs and varieties of the world as blessing in disguise. Despite her feebleness, she still carries on till age 87, married and internationally acclaimed, most translated woman writer in the history of literature. And one of the pioneer of Seventh - day Adventist church denomination

¹ White, Ministry of Healing, 248

²² Pipim, 102

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