

# Just How Hard Is It to Be a Prophet?

*We don't always understand the difficulties and struggles of that task.*



**W** BY TERRIE DOPP AAMODT

WHICH IS HARDER? BEING A prophet, or having a prophet? While it is demanding and almost unbearably painful to *be* a prophet, the prophetic call is almost irresistible. In some ways, *having* a prophet is more complicated than *being* a prophet. How do ordinary people respond to the prophets who appear in their midst?

For millennia they simply murdered them. In more recent times it has been more civilized to *contain* them--like a genie in a bottle, to be let out when it is necessary or convenient. Sometimes it has been easier just to explain them away. Prophets are odd. They are not normal. Their spiritual faculties are enlarged beyond our capacity to comprehend.

If we are to understand and appreciate prophets, however, we must consider them on their own terms, as individuals blessed with spiritual discernment, at least a touch of mysticism, and a powerful prayer life. Their writing and their speaking flow from these charismatic gifts.

That brings us to Ellen Harmon White.

Sometimes Ellen White has been the genie in a bottle. Increasingly, she has been explained away as a fussy, quirky woman who claimed to be more than she was. Too seldom has she been examined as a deeply gifted woman, conventionally powerless in a man's world,

## online edition

### ABOUT THE REVIEW

INSIDE THIS WEEK  
WHAT'S UPCOMING  
GET PAST ISSUES  
LATE-BREAKING NEWS  
OUR PARTNERS  
SUBSCRIBE ONLINE  
CONTACT US  
PRINT INDEX

### HANDY RESOURCES

CHURCH LOCATOR  
SUNSET CALENDAR  
[FREE NEWSLETTER](#)

### SEARCH THIS SITE

Exclude PDF Files

Email this article

*Becoming a powerful prophetic voice was the last thing Ellen Harmon could have imagined.*



unconventionally powerful in the realm of spiritual authority.

Ellen White's frail body was her first text, the first expression of her spiritual gift; soon she was also known for her healing gifts and her fervent prayer life. She often exercised her gifts with reluctance, torn by her maternal instincts and her unwillingness to speak in public. These sometimes unbearable stresses, though, fueled the power of her ministry and underlay her spiritual authority.

### **Reluctantly Answering the Call**

Becoming a powerful prophetic voice was the last thing Ellen Harmon could have imagined. The serious little girl became even more spiritually intense after her tragic accident closed her off from most of society. While she became more spiritually focused, she also grew more socially awkward and fearful, and her health deteriorated. At age 15, when she first felt the call to participate in a public prayer meeting, she instinctively shrank from the impression. Later she ventured to a prayer meeting, and after several prayers, she recalled, "I opened my mouth in prayer before I was aware of it. . . . As I prayed, the burden and agony of soul that I had so long felt left me. . . . Inexpressible love for Jesus filled my soul. Wave after wave of glory rolled over me, until my body grew stiff. Everything was shut out from me but Jesus and glory, and I knew nothing of what was passing around me."<sup>1</sup>

For Ellen Harmon, as well as for so many other women with unusual spiritual gifts, however, the agony far outweighed the ecstasy. Her body, racked with the stresses of incessant travel and witnessing, appeared to break down with use. In addition, she had to face charges of mesmerism and self-hypnosis, reminding herself that she was "not suffering as an evil-doer, but for Christ's sake, and how many had suffered the same before me?"<sup>2</sup>

A few months after she married James White in 1846, Ellen faced another physical trial. She became very ill and hovered near death for three weeks, in spite of her family's prayers. "Our neighbors thought I could not live," she recalled. She implored her family to cease their prayers because, she thought, "their prayers were protracting my sufferings." As she lay near death, groaning with every breath, her friend Henry Nichols placed his hands on her head, declared her whole, and "fell back prostrated by the power of God." Ellen White recalled, "I believed that the work was of God, and the pain left me."<sup>3</sup>

Unlike some religious leaders, whose spiritual lives called them to an existence of solitude and contemplation, the Whites were constantly in the public eye. As much as they may have yearned for a retreat into a focused spiritual life, their early ministry was marked by the incessant demands of the practical world.

The conflict between the everyday realities of normal society and the demands of spiritual leadership peaked in Ellen White's dual roles as mother and prophet. Her writings again and again demonstrate that her maternal instincts were alive and well, but her denial of them for spiritual purposes is painful to read.

When their first child was still an infant, the Whites were besieged by groups of believers requesting personal visits. Ellen refused to go, believing it would be impossible to travel with her baby. James and Ellen White were abjectly poor, and Ellen had to skimp on milk for herself and baby Henry in order to clothe him. Soon the infant became very ill, and fervent prayer did not bring a recovery. Fearing that God was allowing their infant to die because his parents had not answered the call to travel, James and Ellen promised God in prayer that they would visit believers if He would spare their son's life. Within a day their child was recovering.<sup>4</sup>

Soon the Whites were on the road, leaving 10-month-old Henry with a friend. It was a severe trial to leave him, his mother said, and yet "we dared not let our affection for the child keep us from the path of duty."<sup>5</sup> "I believed that the Lord had spared him to us when he was very sick," she said, "and that if I should let him hinder me from doing my duty, God would remove him from me."<sup>6</sup> For five years the Howland family cared for Henry at their own expense, and once a year his mother brought him a present of clothing "as Hannah did Samuel."<sup>7</sup>

As if that were not enough, the same thing happened when the Whites had their second son, Edson. The baby became ill, and his parents, mindful of the meetings they planned to hold in a distant town, prayed for his restoration. When the child improved, they left to conduct their meetings. Ellen White, ill herself, became very depressed by her separation from both sons, "yearning for my children, . . . battling with my feelings," sobbing to God for strength.<sup>8</sup>

Five weeks later, when they saw Edson again, his mother said, "He clasped his little arms about my neck, and laid his head upon my shoulder."<sup>9</sup> She noticed that he was very feeble, not the healthy child they had said goodbye to a few weeks earlier.

Edson continued to decline despite seasons of prayer three times a day. Soon he lay unconscious and cyanotic, his eyes dim with what appeared to be approaching death. The frantic parents decided that their last resort would be an anointing by the elders, and James raced to retrieve one of them from a departing canal boat.

Baby Edson was restored to consciousness and eventually to health, but his mother was devastated by the ordeal. She sank into depression until her husband and friends prayed for her relief. "They would not yield the point," she recalled, "until my voice was united with theirs for deliverance. It came. I began to hope, and my trembling faith grasped the promises of God."<sup>10</sup>

## Timid No More

What would make a mother go through this? Perhaps we who exist at ordinary levels of spiritual giftedness will never understand. It is very clear that Ellen White loved her children and wanted to be with them. Less comprehensible is the power of a spiritual calling that overrides these human instincts. It is not easy being a prophet.

Being a public speaker was only a little less difficult for Ellen White. When she experienced a call to public ministry at age 17, she was so overwhelmed and certain of failure that she "coveted death as a release."<sup>11</sup> By the time she married James White, however, she had resigned herself to becoming one of the first American women to speak in public. She noted that the few non-Adventist visitors to the cottage meetings she and James held usually came because they were attracted by curiosity to hear a woman speak.

"At first I moved out timidly in the work of public speaking," she wrote. "If I had confidence, it was given me by the Holy Spirit. If I spoke with freedom and power, it was given me of God. Our meetings were usually conducted in such a manner that both of us took part. My 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."<sup>12</sup>

From these uncertain beginnings Ellen White became the prophetic voice of Seventh-day Adventists, fulfilling the prophet's role of admonishing the flock and pointing it to a deeper spiritual life. This woman, once a timid girl, had developed a voice of power and spiritual authority within a church organization run by men.

## Which Is Harder?

Which is harder: being a prophet or having a prophet?

In my own study of Ellen Harmon White's life, I have concluded that although a prophet's life appears to be simple--the prophet merely has to follow her well-developed spiritual instincts--it is actually very complicated. Prophets receive an extra measure of spiritual gifts, but they are also as human as anyone else; hence, their conflicts are larger than ours.

On the other hand, perhaps we have made the business of having a prophet more difficult than it needs to be. Perhaps it is possible both to

appreciate prophetic gifts and to lower our anxiety over the ways prophets differ from the rest of us.

Perhaps having a prophet is easier than we thought.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Early Writings*, p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 2, p. 70.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 89, 90.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>6</sup> *Life Sketches of Ellen G. White*, p. 120.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 2, p. 128.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138.


<sup>11</sup> *Testimonies*, vol. 1, p. 63.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

---

*Terrie Dopp Aamodt is a professor of English and history at [Walla Walla College](#) in College Place, Washington.*

---

 [Email this article](#)

[LATE-BREAKING NEWS](#) | [INSIDE THIS WEEK](#) | [WHAT'S UPCOMING](#) | [GET PAST ISSUES](#)  
[ABOUT THE REVIEW](#) | [OUR PARTNERS](#) | [SUBSCRIBE ONLINE](#)  
[CONTACT US](#) | [INDEX](#) | [LOCATE A CHURCH](#) | [SUNSET CALENDAR](#)