

## Experience as Test of Truth: EGW's Changing Views on Hell

### **1 T 23-25: Ellen White's intense fear of God and of hell, early in her life:**

"In my mind the justice of God eclipsed His mercy and love. [1T 23/24] 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."

"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, carrying them down into the depths of an ever-restless sea of fire."

"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, for I seemed to already feel the pains of perdition...."

"Our heavenly Father was presented before my mind as a tyrant, who delighted in the agonies of the condemned...." (1T 24/25)

"...when the thought took possession of my mind that God delighted in the torture of His creatures, who were formed in His image, a wall of darkness seemed to separate me from Him. When I reflected that the Creator of the universe would plunge the wicked into hell, there to burn through the ceaseless rounds of eternity, my heart sank with fear, and I despaired that so cruel and tyrannical a being would ever condescend to save me from the doom of sin."

"I thought that the fate of the condemned sinner would be mine, to endure the flames of hell forever, even as long as God Himself existed. This impression deepened upon my mind until I feared that I would lose my reason. I would look upon the dumb beasts with envy, because they had no soul to be punished after death. Many times the wish arose that I had never been born."

"Total darkness settled upon me, and there seemed no way out of the shadows. Could the truth have been presented to me as I now understand it, much perplexity and sorrow would have been spared me. If the love of God had been dwelt upon more, and His stern justice less, the beauty and glory of His character would have inspired me with a deep and earnest love for my Creator."

"I have since thought that many inmates of insane asylums were brought there by experiences similar to my own. Their consciences were stricken with a sense of sin, and their trembling faith dared not claim the promised pardon of God. They listened to descriptions of the orthodox hell until it seemed to curdle the very blood in their veins, and burned an [1T 25/26] impression upon the tablets of their memory. Waking or sleeping, the frightful picture was ever before them, until reality became lost in imagination, and they saw only the wreathing flames of a fabulous hell, and heard only the shrieking of the doomed. Reason became dethroned, and the brain was filled with the wild phantasy of a terrible dream. Those who teach the doctrine of an eternal hell would do well to look more closely after their authority for so cruel a belief."

### **1T 39-40: Ellen White's reaction when her mother began considering the possibility that there was no immortal soul nor eternal hell:**

"I listened to these new ideas with an intense and painful interest. When alone with my mother, I inquired if she really believed that the soul was not immortal. Her reply was that she feared we had been in error on that subject as well as upon some others.

"'But, mother,' said I, 'do you really believe that the soul sleeps in the grave until the resurrection?' Do you think that the Christian, when he dies, does not go immediately to heaven, nor the sinner to hell?"

"She answered: 'The Bible gives us no proof that there is an eternally burning hell. If there is such a place, it should be mentioned in the Sacred Book.'"

"'Why mother!' cried I, in astonishment, 'this is strange talk for you! If you believe this strange theory, do not let anyone know of it; for I fear that sinners would gather security from this belief, and never desire to seek the Lord.'"

"'If this is sound Bible truth, she replied, 'instead of preventing the salvation of sinners, it will be means of winning them to Christ. If the love of God will not induce the rebel to yield, the terrors of an eternal hell will not drive him [1T 39-40] to repentance. Besides, it does not seem a proper way to win souls to Jesus, by appealing to one of the lowest attributes of the mind, abject fear. The love of Jesus attracts; it will subdue the hardest heart.'" (1 T 39-40)

### **GC 525, 535: Ellen White's later reflections on the role of experience:**

"The errors of popular theology have driven many a soul to skepticism, who might otherwise have been a believer in the Scriptures. It is impossible for him to accept doctrines which outrage his sense of justice, mercy, and benevolence; and since these are represented as the teaching of the Bible, he refuses to receive it as the word of God." (GC 525)

"How repugnant to every emotion of love and mercy, and even to our sense of justice, is the doctrine that the wicked dead are tormented with fire and brimstone in an eternally burning hell, that for the sins of a brief earthly life they are to suffer torture as long as God shall live." (GC 535)