

# An Unutterable Sense of Glory

Stanley D. Hickerson

Some years ago, a visitor to Ellen White's last residence, Elmshaven, asked, Did Sister White ever sing? Indeed she did! In fact music was an integral part of the early Adventist experience. Adventism's music took shape in the tension between the old singing-schools of the Revolutionary War period and the "better music" movement of Lowell Mason and his cohorts.

In his preface to the 1843 *Millennial Harp*, Joshua V. Himes addressed this tension:

We are aware of the difficulty of suiting the taste of all classes in musical and devotional compositions; the greatest possible diversity for this purpose, which is consistent with the nature of the work in which we are engaged, must therefore be allowed. Some of our hymns, which might be objected to by the more grave and intellectual, and to which we ourselves have never felt any great partiality, have been the means of reaching, for good, the hearts of those who, probably, would not otherwise have been affected; and, as our object, like that of the Apostle, is to save men, we should not hesitate to use all means lawful, that may promise to "save some."<sup>1</sup>

Himes, who lived in a prosperous seaport city, only thinly veiled his personal preferences, but generously made room for those with less refined tastes.

James White, on the other hand, was raised in a rural environment and was personally involved in the older singing-school genre of music. The spirited singing he experienced and in which he led out, probably reflected the less

refined tastes that Himes acknowledged. James kept powerful memories of those times. Advent singing certainly inspired him. An experience from 1842 riveted itself in his mind:

In October, 1842, an Advent camp-meeting was held in Exeter, Me., which I attended. The meeting was large, tents numerous, preaching clear and powerful, and the singing of Second-Advent melodies possessed a power such as I never before witnessed in sacred songs.<sup>2</sup>

After relating the story of a meeting he commenced in Litchfield Plains by singing *You will see your Lord a-coming*, White made these comments:

The reader certainly cannot see poetic merit in the repetition of these simple lines. And if he has never heard the sweet melody to which they were attached, he will be at a loss to see how one voice could employ them so as to hold nearly a thousand persons in almost breathless silence. But it is a fact that there was in those days a power in what was called Advent singing, such as was felt in no other. It seemed to me that not a hand or foot moved in all the crowd before me till I had finished all the words of this lengthy melody. Many wept, and the state of feeling was most favorable for the introduction of the grave subject for the evening.<sup>3</sup>

The lively singing didn't always produce "breathless silence." Joseph Bates, in his autobiography remembered one early Advent camp meeting:

On Sunday, it was judged that there were ten thousand people in the camp. The clear, weighty and solemn preaching of the second coming of Christ, and the fervent prayers and

animated singing of the new Second-advent hymns, accompanied by the Spirit of the living God, sent such thrills through the camp, that many were shouting aloud for joy.<sup>4</sup>

But singing was not reserved just for public meetings. John Loughborough remembered, as a young man, hearing Ellen White going about her common household tasks singing.<sup>5</sup> Ernest Lloyd remembered her singing as she took her morning carriage rides in the fresh air during her later years.<sup>6</sup>

As she led out in family worship, both morning and evening, she would read a chapter from the Bible, sing a few verses of a hymn, kneel for prayer, then sing for one-half hour.<sup>7</sup> Such worship experiences were not limited to the conveniences of home. She along with her "family" of workers would sing even while on public transportation.<sup>8</sup>

Ellen had heard the angels sing, and those experiences became her benchmark for singing here. One warm summer evening, while attending prayer meeting at the Rural Health Retreat, now St. Helena Hospital and Center for Health, she made an interesting comment. The congregation stood and began to sing a hymn she had selected. They sang listlessly and the hymn dragged on monotonously. Ellen White held up her hand and ordered all to stop and then observed:

I have heard the angels sing. They do not sing as you are singing tonight. They sing with reverence, with meaning. Their hearts are in their expressions of song. Now, let us try again





and see if we can put our hearts into the singing of this song.<sup>9</sup>

The congregation began again, and sang with expression and feeling. Indeed, poor singing was painful to the experience of one who had heard the angels sing. In 1882 she shared this personal frustration, observing,

We should endeavor in our songs of praise to approach as nearly as possible to the harmony of the heavenly choirs. I have often been pained to hear untrained voices, pitched to the highest key, literally shrieking the sacred words of some hymn of praise. How inappropriate those sharp, rasping voices for the solemn, joyous worship of God.

I long to stop my ears, or flee from the place, and I rejoice when the painful exercise is ended.<sup>10</sup>

**T**he sense of glory must have been especially powerful on those occasions when Ellen heard the angels sing. Late in her life she had the following experience one night:

I was suffering with rheumatism in my left side and could get no rest because of the pain. I turned from side to side, trying to find ease from the suffering. There was a pain in my heart that portended no good for me. At last I fell asleep.

About half past nine I attempted to turn myself, and as I did so, I became aware that my body was entirely free from pain. As I turned from side to side, and moved my hands, I experienced an extraordinary freedom and lightness that I cannot describe. The room was filled with light, a most beautiful, soft, azure light, and I seemed to be in the arms of heavenly beings.

This peculiar light I have experienced in the past in times of special blessing, but this time it was more distinct, more impressive, and I felt such peace, peace so full and abundant no words can express it. I raised myself into a sitting posture, and I saw that

I was surrounded by a bright cloud, white as snow, the edges of which were tinged with a deep pink. The softest, sweetest music was filling the air, and I recognized the music as the singing of the angels. Then a Voice spoke to me, saying: "Fear not; I am your Saviour. Holy angels are all about you."

"Then this is heaven," I said, "and now I can be at rest. I shall have no more messages to bear, no more misrepresentations to endure. Everything

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will be easy now, and I shall enjoy peace and rest. Oh, what inexpressible peace fills my soul! Is this indeed heaven? Am I one of God's little children? and shall I always have this peace?"

The Voice replied: "Your work is not yet done."<sup>11</sup>

**A**s a teenager, Ellen experienced, in a vision, the glory of singing with the angels. She described it this way:

Then I was pointed to the glory of heaven, to the treasure laid up for the faithful. Everything was lovely and glorious. The angels would sing a lovely song, then they would cease singing and take their crowns from their heads and cast them glittering at the feet of the lovely Jesus, and with melodious voices cry, "Glory, Alleluia!" I joined with them in their songs of praise and honor to the Lamb, and every time I opened my mouth to praise Him, I felt an unutterable sense of the glory that surrounded me. It was a far more, an exceeding and eternal weight of glory. Said the angel, "The little remnant who love God

and keep His commandments and are faithful to the end will enjoy this glory and ever be in the presence of Jesus and sing with the holy angels."<sup>12</sup>

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*For additional stories of early Advent music, see Nix, James R., Early Advent Singing, Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1994.*

<sup>1</sup> Himes, Joshua V., *Millennial Harp*, (Boston: Published at 14 Devonshire Street, 1843), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> White, James, *Life Incidents*, (Battle Creek, Michigan: Steam Press of the Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, 1868), p. 72, 73.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94, 95.

<sup>4</sup> Bates, Joseph, *The Autobiography of Elder Joseph Bates*, (Battle Creek, Michigan: Steam Press of the Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, 1868), p. 265

<sup>5</sup> Spicer, William A. "The Spirit of Prophecy in the Advent Movement No. 1." *Review and Herald*, Vol., No. 1 115 (6 January 1938): 6.

<sup>6</sup> Lloyd, Ernest, "Did She Ever Sing?," *Review and Herald*, Vol. 136, No. 32 (6 August 1959): 32.

<sup>7</sup> White, Arthur L., *The Lonely Years*, (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1984), pp. 378.

<sup>8</sup> White, Arthur L., *The Progressive Years*, (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1986), pp. 292, 293.

<sup>9</sup> White, Arthur L., *The Lonely Years*, (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1984), p. 384. As told to the author by A. P. Guyton, a Longtime painter at the Sanitarium, who was present.

<sup>10</sup> White, Ellen G., "The Schools of the Prophets," *Signs of the Times*, Vol. 8, No. 24, (22 June 1882).

<sup>11</sup> White, Ellen G., *Testimonies for the Church Vol. 9*, (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1948), pp. 65, 66

<sup>12</sup> White, Ellen G., *Early Writings*, (Washington, D. C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1938), p. 66.