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# Lest We Forget

*"We have nothing to fear for the future, except as we shall forget the way the Lord has led us, and His teaching in our past history." LS 196*

## G. I. BUTLER

### and RIGHTEOUSNESS BY FAITH

*by Fred Bischoff*

**T**here was little evidence of the "faith of Jesus" in the Adventists of the 1880's.<sup>1</sup> The "faith of Jesus" encompasses an understanding of the gospel that Scripture outlines and a confidence in the testimony of Jesus. It is revealed by a personal embodiment of the character qualities of God disclosed to us in both of the above. We will review these qualities in the life of Elder Butler, age 52 to 81 (from 1886 to 1915).

Elder George I. Butler took strong exception in 1886 to E. J. Waggoner's teaching on the law in Galatians 3. That year he wrote Ellen White at least four times lamenting what Waggoner was doing, and asking for her opinion. He felt this issue was one of "the principles of our faith."<sup>2</sup> In one of his first letters to her, Butler manifested a healthy openness on his part. If he were shown to be wrong, he declared, "I feel sure I would accept it . . ."<sup>3</sup> Every other statement showed an inflexibility that helps to explain the deep depression into

which he later lapsed.<sup>4</sup> He believed he was standing firmly for the right, while Ellen White was shown instead that he was resisting light.<sup>5</sup> In a letter to Butler and Uriah Smith in April 1887 she said, "I do not wish the letters that I have sent to you should be used in a way that you will take it for granted that your ideas are all correct and Dr. Waggoner's and Elder Jones's are all wrong."<sup>6</sup>

His reaction to this letter further illustrated how unbelief drains one of spiritual vigor, while diverting enormous energy into self-directed endeavors. A year and a half later from his sick bed he wrote a 41-page letter to Ellen White, just before the Minneapolis General Conference session. In it he blamed her for his illness. "It was sadness of heart . . . by the position you took that gave me that four months' sickness."<sup>7</sup> He stubbornly asserted, "I have not, Sister White, been able to see the justice of your letter of April 5, 1887, and never expect to . . ."<sup>8</sup>

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In response, she wrote him from Minneapolis that his spirit was "not Christlike," and he had "not kept pace with the opening providence of God."<sup>9</sup> She pointedly stated, "If my letter caused so great consequences to you . . . I shall not be held accountable for it; for if you had received it in the right spirit, it would have had no such results."<sup>10</sup> Regarding the 1886 General Conference, she emphasized, "My guide . . . stretched out his arms toward Dr. Waggoner, and to you, Elder Butler, and said in substance as follows: 'Neither have all the light upon the law, neither position is perfect.'<sup>11</sup> The guide also told her, "There is much light yet to shine forth from the law of God and the gospel of righteousness. This message, understood in its true character, and proclaimed in the Spirit, will lighten the earth with its glory."<sup>12</sup> This identifies vital aspects of the message, connecting it with the angel of Revelation 18, and showing it to be the loud cry message.

In December 1888, Ellen White wrote to Elder Butler and his wife identifying three causes of his physical illness and spiritual blindness:

1. his wife's ideas and feelings;
2. his "spirit of warfare" on health reform, his "habits in eating and in labor"; and
3. his "pride of soul" and "large amount of self."<sup>13</sup>

Butler's 12 years of isolation in Florida caring for his invalid wife, "passing through severe trials."<sup>14</sup> were a fulfillment of what Ellen White was shown back at Minneapolis, that Elder Butler's "stubbornness and unbelief was sinful and God would bring his afflicting hand heavily upon him if he did not repent and have another spirit, and if he still held his perversity and stubbornness, he would come nearer still to him in affliction."<sup>15</sup>

During 1890 and 1891, Mrs. White addressed the desperate spiritual needs of Uriah Smith and George Butler in several letters. They were "ensnared by the enemy" and "unfaithful." Their position and work was "to

unsettle the faith of the people of God."<sup>16</sup> They had left Ellen White alone, and she felt it more than the death of her husband James.<sup>17</sup> They had despised the message and the messengers of righteousness by faith and were "warring against the light."<sup>18</sup> Smith made a confession in January of 1891 that was in the right direction. In contrast, Butler saw no need to do so.<sup>19</sup> Butler wrote to Ellen White in September stating, "what you charge me with . . . I cannot make it seem to me to be so, and really it seems otherwise."<sup>20</sup>

In January 1893, she wrote how Butler and Smith were holding themselves "aloof, not blending . . . with the work that brethren Jones and Waggoner" were led of God to do.<sup>21</sup> With such a course, Butler and Smith, "who might have received the richest blessings," she stated, "will meet with eternal loss, for though they should repent and be saved at last, they can never regain that which they have lost through their wrong course of action."<sup>22</sup> They continued "standing in the way of others" and "retarded the work."<sup>23</sup>

In April, Butler wrote to Elder Haskell, still not seeing any sin in his actions, and ascribing Ellen White's evaluation of him to her own opinion.<sup>24</sup>

In May, Ellen White was yearning that Butler "would come out from the shadow of death and into the chamber of light and brightness." She added, "I have no call to write to him anything. Poor man, I feel so sorry for him!"<sup>25</sup>

June 13, in an article in the *Review and Herald*, Butler admitted God was leading in "the greater agitation of the doctrines of justification by faith." In the article he contended, "I never, for a moment since my conversion, supposed I could be saved by my own good works . . ." Yet he admitted "that additional light of great importance has been shining upon these subjects."<sup>26</sup>

The next month Ellen White said Butler and Smith were cherishing the

same spirit from Minneapolis, and had "little appreciation" of heavenly light. Significantly, she differentiated Elder Butler's position. "No greater light or evidence will come to any one of you except to Elder Butler. He has not been directly in the channel where light from the throne has come upon him. The Lord looks with compassion . . . in a special sense upon Elder Butler."<sup>27</sup>

In the August 15, 1893 *Review and Herald* he reviewed Ellen White's new book, *Steps to Christ*, and accepted every part of her precious volume.

In 1895, Ellen White wrote, "If Elder Butler had heeded the warning, the entreaties of the Spirit of God, if he had walked in the counsel given him of God, he would now have been walking in strength and efficiency."<sup>28</sup>

A transition came toward the end of the 1890's. Ellen White had one of the first copies of her new book *Desire of Ages* sent to Butler. He replied late in 1898 with gratitude that she would think of him. April of the next year she in turn wrote him, "You misapprehend me when you suppose I have lost all hope of you. This has never been the case . . . I would be pleased to see you take hold of the work again and move forward . . . in the rich truths which God has given us."<sup>29</sup>

The crisis years of the early 1900's show what may appear as contradictory events and counsels. In 1901, after the death of his wife, Brother Butler returned to active church work. However, in January 1902, Uriah Smith printed articles in the *Review and Herald* still strongly opposing the views of Jones, Waggoner, and Ellen White, according to A. G. Daniells.<sup>30</sup>

In February 1902, Ellen White directed the church to the contribution the pioneers offered. She affirmed their need for Elders Butler and Smith, and stated regarding Elder Butler, "We welcome him into our ranks once more, and regard him as one of our most valuable laborers."<sup>31</sup>

The *Review and Herald* Board removed Smith from position as head editor in March. Butler came to his defense, taking what Daniells described as "a

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most unreasonable position," and being "unnecessarily severe in his criticism."<sup>32</sup>

In May, Ellen White strongly affirmed that as a result of his years of affliction, "Elder Butler is strong in physical and spiritual health. The Lord has proved and tested and tried him . . . I see in Elder Butler one who has humbled his soul before God. He has another spirit than the Elder Butler of younger years . . ."<sup>33</sup>

In April 1903, she again wrote, "I rejoice that Brother Butler is with us in this work . . . God desires the gray-haired pioneers, the men who acted a part in the work when the first, second and third angels' messages were first given, to stand in their place in His work today."<sup>34</sup> She wrote him in June, "We must now do a work that should have been done long ago . . . The . . . experience through which the people of God passed in the early history of our work must be republished."<sup>35</sup>

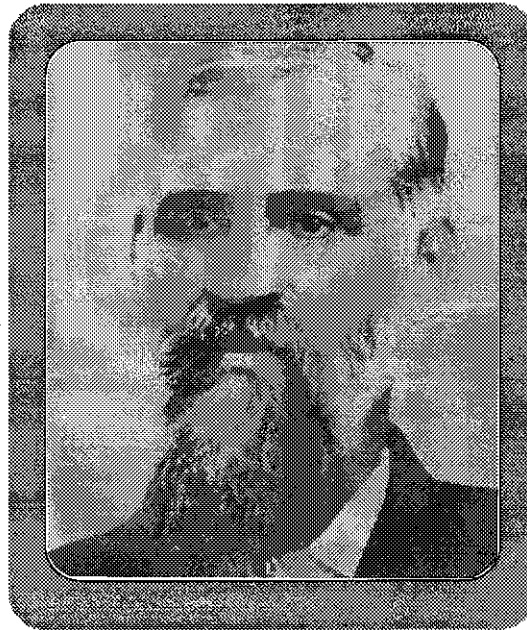
In 1904, she wrote him regarding the foundational crisis. "At this crisis all are called upon to take their position . . . Not a stone is to be moved in the foundation of this truth—not a pillar moved."<sup>36</sup> She repeated this again to him as late as 1910.<sup>37</sup>

Brother Butler's work in supporting the Madison and Loma Linda schools showed a new confidence in the Spirit of Prophecy. In 1915, his speech at the Autumn Council of the General Conference held at Loma Linda helped to save the new medical school.<sup>38</sup>

### Reflection

The refining fire had done its work with Brother Butler. His wife's illness and death, and his personal illness and trials impressed upon him the importance of health reform, and humbled his view of himself. Through it all, he remained loyal to the church and learned to put greater confidence in the Spirit of Prophecy.

In his experience we can see how a theory of the truth can co-exist with persistent resistance against it. We understand how the Lord often uses great trials to break through our self-confidence and deception, until we begin to see the deeper issues of our needs and



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the gospel solutions. The missed opportunities of 1888 corporately added up to what Ellen White described as "insubordination," and resulted in the church having to remain in this world many more years.<sup>39</sup>

The message of righteousness by faith brought by Jones and Waggoner in the 1880's could have prepared a people to meet Christ.<sup>40</sup> When this message and work was hindered, the resulting spiritual confusion led to heresies that attacked the very foundations of the church. Upon her return from Australia, when after the 1901 General Conference Ellen White saw no deep spiritual change in the church, she began to realize that the window of opportunity had passed, and turned her attention to damage control and preservation of the foundations of the church.

She called Smith and Butler to assist her from 1902 onward in preserving these foundations. These men were pioneers who had remained faithful to the cause, though blinded in part to the advancing providences of God. Her affirmation of God's leading both of these men to have a place in His work right to the end of their lives was in spite of the fact that they did not understand the message of righteousness by faith in all its dimensions.

They were valuable for other aspects of the message, particularly their "pioneer" perspective and unwavering loyalty to the movement. It was as if

she said to the church, "Since you are not going to finish the house, at least leave the foundations. Another generation will come, and finish the house." Some of the pioneers who were called to help her in this work were the very ones in part responsible for the lost opportunity. And so they were called to counter the consequences of their own actions. It appears they did this loyally and willingly, though they never regained what she said was their "eternal loss." May we affirm the foundations, and plead with the Lord to finish the house, cooperating with Him in this most important work. ♦

1. *EGW 1888 Materials*, pp. 212, 217.
2. *Manuscripts and Memories of Minneapolis*, p. 46.
3. *Ibid.* p. 23.
4. *Ibid.* pp. 68, 69.
5. *1888 Materials*, pp. 1005, 1246.
6. *Ibid.* p. 32.
7. *MMM*, p. 82.
8. *Ibid.* p. 99.
9. *1888 Materials*, p. 86, 89.
10. *Ibid.* p. 96.
11. *Ibid.* p. 93.
12. *Ibid.* pp. 165, 166.
13. *Ibid.* pp. 190-194.
14. *Ibid.* p. 644.
15. *Ibid.* p. 848.
16. *Ibid.* pp. 714, 715, 717.
17. *Ibid.* p. 741.
18. *Ibid.* p. 846.
19. *Ibid.* p. 1005.
20. *MMM*, p. 210.
21. *1888 Materials*, p. 1128, 1136.
22. *Ibid.* p. 1128.
23. *Ibid.* p. 1140.
24. *MMM*, pp. 251, 256.
25. *1888 Material*, p. 1184.
26. *MMM*, p. 260.
27. *1888 Material*, p. 1137, 1138.
28. *Ibid.* p. 1412.
29. A. L. White, *E. G. W. Biography, Vol. 4*, pp. 406, 407.
30. *MMM*, pp. 318, 319.
31. *20 Manuscript Releases*, p. 220.
32. *MMM*, p. 317.
33. *Retirement Years*, p. 117.
34. *1888 Materials*, p. 1801.
35. *17MR*, p. 344.
36. *19MR*, p. 311.
37. *1888 Materials*, p. 1811.
38. *For God and CME*, p. 106, 113.
39. *10MR*, p. 277.
40. *1888 Materials*, pp. 210, 1814.









