

# LEARNING FROM OUR HISTORY

By Pastor Paul Penno Jr.

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David Irving is the author of a book, "Hitler's War," in which he denies that there were gas ovens at Auschwitz and that Hitler did not authorize the extermination of Jews. His book has stirred a storm of comment regarding historians. In France and Germany it is against the law to publish such statements that are considered historical lies. The comment in the press regarding Irving's book has stirred much discussion about the evil results of twisting and distorting historical facts. Irving "is a falsifier of history," says Lawyer Richard Rampton.

The person who loves Bible truth is also concerned about the importance of historians telling the truth about history. He who lies about the past lies about the future; "we cannot escape history," said Abraham Lincoln. A distorted or falsified history spells ruin for the future of a nation, which is why German leaders view with alarm all efforts to falsify the history of Germany's past lest a future generation in ignorance or misinformation repeat that sad history.

The same honest concern applies to the history of God's work. The NIV for Jeremiah 8:8 reveals the prophet as telling the Kingdom of Judah that their historians have falsified their national history and in so doing plunged their nation into ruin. "How can you say, 'We are wise for we have the law [torah] of the Lord,' when actually the lying pen of the scribes has handled it falsely?" Likewise, the scribes and

Pharisees in Jesus' day "handled falsely" their history and thereby prepared to lead the nation to crucify the Son of God. A wise writer has warned the church that "we have nothing to fear for the future except as we forget the way the Lord has led us and His teaching in our past history." Jesus says, "Take heed that no man deceive you" (Mt. 24:4). To be deceived is not merely a temporary setback, it can be fatal.

In this time of great crisis for God's work of proclaiming the gospel to all the world, it is especially important that the history of the work of the Holy Spirit not be "falsified" as wrote the ancient scribes in Jeremiah's day. Those who dig into the facts of national or church history and present them honestly are to be welcomed not resented or silenced. "Prove all things," says the inspired apostle, and "hold fast that which is good" (1 Thess. 5:21). You want your doctor to be careful and accurate when it comes to your health; it's also important to remember that the health of the church is involved with honest history.

Denominational leaders, conference officials, pastors, and thoughtful lay members share an agonizing concern. Is Heaven concerned also? It's the most difficult problem the Lord has wrestled with in 6000 years!

The usual answer is, "The latter rain is the solution. It will refresh and awaken the church."

But haven't we been seeking it for 140 years? And we've learned that large baptisms (as in Rwanda) don't solve the problem, for new members quickly become infected with our old virus of

lukewarmness. If we baptized a billion new members, they would soon catch the same disease. Our churches in the Third World are fast becoming like us in the Western World.<sup>1</sup>

“Then let’s pray more earnestly!” Again, a good answer. We are told to pray for the latter rain. The Jews at the Wailing Wall are also praying, incessantly, for their Messiah to come. But they first have a duty to do—to read the New Testament, recover faith in the Messiah whom their fathers crucified, and repent. Does Heaven see that *we also have a duty to do* before our prayers for the latter rain can be heard?

Jesus says, “Because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth” (Rev. 3:16, NIV).

Another popular answer to our question is, “Put the members to work winning souls. That will revive them.” “Work” has always been healthful for us. But how do you get a lukewarm church to work, other than in spurts? Will it be true at last that righteousness has to be by works? If works must bring it, won’t we have the cart before the horse?

Another suggestion: “The organized church is hopeless; join the offshoots. They’re not lukewarm.” But how do we know? Their saying so doesn’t make it so. Give them time. History has proven that a zeal without knowledge soon fails.

Our problem has been with us a long time.

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<sup>1</sup> This is evident as living standards rise in the Third World, and as Adventists from there emigrate to Europe, Australia, or the U.S.

I remember as a youth reading and hearing the frequent solemn appeals from church leaders to “make a covenant with God by sacrifice,” “let nothing between the soul and the Saviour,” give Him our all. When at camp meetings we were called to reconsecration, almost everyone would jump to his feet. Then we’d go home as lukewarm as before. Occasional revivalists shoot across the sky like meteors, camp meetings are abuzz, and then again we’re back where we were.

We heard the solemn appeals from the General Conference presidents, W. A. Spicer (1922-1930), C. H. Watson (1930-1936), and J. L. McElhany (1936-1950). As a student at old Southern Junior College I remember seeing Elder Watson drive around campus in his tiny Bantam Austin—setting us Chevy—and Buick-driving Americans an example in economy and sacrifice. I also remember the awe-inspiring revivalist, Meade MacGuire. All these revivals and reformations have ended in continued lukewarmness. Even “celebrationism” seems not to have helped.

When we almost broke through.

Prominent among General Conference presidents who pleaded for a change was Elder Robert H. Pierson (1966—1979). Totally devoted, he did his best. Twenty years ago he wanted the church to recover the 1888 new covenant message, but then came the Palmdale Conference of early 1976 when he was persuaded instead to yield his support to the Australian “new theology” as the path to revival. The soul-stirring 1973-74 Annual Council Appeals that he inspired became history. The wordliness he

decried is now rampant. And the “new theology” sucked hundreds of ministers and thousands of members out of church fellowship. (It was not new covenant truth!)

Ancient Israel’s experience illuminates ours. Abraham’s justification by faith was to have been the guiding light of a nation’s world mission. “In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed,” the Lord promised (Gen. 12:3). Abraham made no promise in return; all he did was believe the Lord’s promise (Gen. 15:6). *That promise of God was the new covenant.*

Before the giving of the law at Sinai with “thunders, and lightings,” earthquake, fire, and the death boundary, the Lord tried to re-establish the same new covenant with Abraham’s descendants: “If you will indeed listen [Hebrew] to My voice, and keep [cherish, Hebrew] My covenant [His new covenant promise to Abraham], *then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people*” (Ex. 19:5).<sup>2</sup> Of all nations in the world, they were to be “the head and not the tail” (Deut. 28:13). But Mt. Sinai was the turning point in the nation’s destiny, for they refused the Lord’s new covenant of justification by faith. Instead of humbly saying “Amen” to *God’s* promise as Abraham did (the Hebrew word for “believe” is amen), the people promised a works program of obedience, “All that the Lord has spoken we will do” (Ex. 19:8). *That was the old covenant.* The nation

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<sup>2</sup> The Hebrew word often translated “obey” means “listen” (*shamea*). The word translated “keep” in this text is *shamar*, which in Genesis 2:15 means to “cherish,” to treasure, to prize highly, but not explicitly “obey.”

bound themselves to a long detour that would finally lead them to the terrible deed of Christ’s crucifixion.

There were ups and downs in Israel’s history.

David seems to have understood that the Lord’s new covenant promise included total national preeminence in the world: “I will appoint a place for My people Israel, and will plant them, that they may dwell in a place of their own and move no more; nor shall the sons of wickedness oppress them anymore, as previously. . . I will subdue all your enemies” (1 Chron. 17:9, 10).

Solomon for a time grasped the promise, praying “that all the peoples of the earth may know that the Lord is God; there is no other” (1 Kings 8:60). Translated into simple English, this meant that there were to be no cruel world empires to trample down the earth, such as Assyria, Babylon, Medo-Persia, Grecia or Rome. Israel would have remained forever the benevolent super-power of the world. But Assyria rose to terrorizing world dictatorship in 933 B.C., almost the exact time Kings Rehoboam and Jeroboam began their slide into apostasy in 931. From then on there was seldom anything in Israel but old covenant disappointment, century after century. Two fantastic phenomena evolved side by side: apostasy deepening in both Israel and Judah, paralleled by Assyria’s growing terrorism. As God’s people’s apostasy became almost total, Babylon’s and at last Rome’s rule became ever more oppressive.

Who can imagine how much needless suffering the world at large had to endure! It all came at the direct result of the old covenant which Israel

fastened upon themselves at Sinai. This fatal choice was the beginning of the detour which must after many centuries finally lead God's people back to the justification by faith that Abraham experienced. There is no evidence that any king after David truly understood it. Probably Paul was the first to discern this significance of Israelite history as a detour leading back eventually to the new covenant given to Abraham: "The law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith" (Gal. 3:24).

Even the way the law was given at Sinai in Exodus 20 was the result of their old covenant. Did the Lord have to frighten Abraham in that terror-induced way? He simply wrote the law in his heart. In contrast, at Sinai He must write it on tables of stone! And even the sanctuary was an accommodation to the people's unbelief because Paul says the *old* covenant required an "earthly sanctuary" (Heb. 9:1). Build it, the Lord said, "that I may dwell *among them*," since because of their old covenant unbelief He could not dwell in them as He wanted to do (Ex. 25:8). The Levitical sacrificial service with its rivers of blood, which the Lord never "delighted in," was the result of the people's unbelief (cf. Isa. 1:11-14).<sup>3</sup>

A bird's-eye view of Israel's story demonstrates old covenant unbelief impelling them to final ruin. Monarch after monarch dragged their nation downhill. Not one ruler of the northern kingdom ever did what was "right," although the Lord pleaded with

them by numerous prophets and messengers (2 Kings 17:13, 14). Finally in 722 B.C. Assyria crushed them forever as a nation and scattered them irrevocably among the Gentiles. Even "the tail" disappeared.

Meanwhile, Judah steadily rebelled. Several of their kings did desperately try a stop-gap of revival and reformation, such as Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah, and last of all, beloved young Josiah. But Scripture shows that each simply tried to renew an old covenant revival. Never was new covenant justification by faith recovered. They were sincerely blind to the faith which Abraham had experienced. The problem was not that they had an "organization;" it was their heart-alienation.

Hezekiah (729-686 B.C.) narrowly missed going down in history as the greatest king ever to sit on David's throne. If he had said "amen" when the Lord told him, "Set your house in order, for you shall die" (2 Kings 20:1), his outstanding performance would have left no record of evil in his reign. But even he was not reconciled to God!

When he pouted and begged to be healed, telling the Lord it's not fair ("Haven't I served with 'a perfect heart?'" ) the Lord added 15 years to his life; then came tragedy. The healed king proudly exposed the nation's secrets to their future enemy Babylon, and sired the worst ruler Judah ever had—Manasseh. The kingdom bottomed out when he taught the people "to do more evil than the nations whom the Lord had destroyed before the children of Israel" (2 Chron. 33:9). Good king Hezekiah's reformation evaporated in thin air when

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<sup>3</sup> See also Jer. 6:20, 7:22; Amos 5:21-27, etc.

his wicked son ascended the throne. The people followed him into evil as eagerly as they had followed Hezekiah into old covenant reformation. Faithful Hezekiah's son is cited as the prime reason for their national ruin (Jer. 15:4).

Josiah was the last reprieve.

This young king's zeal for the Lord was unbounded (639-608 B.C.). Again, in deep piety he sought to renew the old covenant: "He made all who were present in Jerusalem and Benjamin take their stand for it" (2 Chron. 34:31, 32). But the prophetess Huldah had to tell him sadly that it was too late; all this "reformation" was only veneer-deep. Utter disaster must "gender [its] bondage" to the ruin of the nation and their captivity in an alien land (cf. Gal. 4:24).

Josiah even surpassed Hezekiah in his devotion to the Spirit of Prophecy, zealous in following every detail as he knew it—especially Deuteronomy. Never had a king so meticulously obeyed the written word. The young Jeremiah rejoiced. But while maintaining such devotion to the written Spirit of Prophecy, Josiah managed to reject its living demonstration. The problem was that the renewed "spiritual gift" came through the most unlikely avenue that king or people could imagine—the mouth of a supposedly pagan king!

Pharaoh Necho of Egypt was leading his army in opposition to the rising power of Babylon. Josiah thought it his duty to attack him. Didn't Moses in the Spirit of Prophecy tell Israel to oppose the heathen? But the zealous king couldn't discern how Necho was on God's errand. He warned Josiah, "Refrain

from meddling with God, who is with me, lest He destroy you" (2 Chron. 35:21). The Chronicler says the king "did not heed the words of Necho from the mouth of God." The Lord was forced to let the young king die of his battle wounds (vss. 22-24). Jeremiah was heart-broken, for Josiah's revival fizzled out with his untimely death. From then on it was downhill all the way.

Reliving Josiah's blindness.

Like Josiah, is it possible for us as Seventh-day Adventists to think we are super-loyal to "the Spirit of Prophecy" while at the same time rejecting its living demonstration? That actually happened in 1888; our brethren were replaying Josiah's "tape." In rejecting that "most precious message" "sent from heaven" they imagined they were loyal to Ellen White's *past writings* while setting aside the Lord's living message.<sup>4</sup>

Are God's hands ever tied so that He cannot do what He wants to do? How could that be if He is omnipotent?

The Bible as a whole makes it quite clear that He cannot force the human will, any more than a man by brute force can make a woman love him. The Old Testament reveals how God tried every way possible to get His people Israel of old to receive the blessings He longed to give them. Jesus said to them: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Uriah Smith's and G.I. Butler's letters to Ellen White of Feb. 17, 1890, Sept. 24, 1892 (Manuscript Memories of 1888, pp. 152—157, 206—212). The Lord not only sent "prophets" to Israel, but "messengers" also (2 Chron. 36:16).

prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!" (Mt. 23:37).

God tried every method except forcing their will: "The Lord God of their fathers sent to them by His messengers, rising up betimes, and sending; because He had compassion on His people, . . . but they mocked the messengers of God, and despised His words, and misused His prophets, . . . till there was no remedy" (2 Chron. 36:15, 16).

He tried sending calamities, letting them be oppressed by the Philistines, sending famines (no rain for three and a half years in the time of Elijah), the conquest of the northern kingdom by the Assyrians, and finally letting the Babylonians destroy their magnificent Temple and Jerusalem itself, and take them captive to a heathen land (vss. 17-20).

If fear is a valid motivation to produce repentance, how could fear be made more effective? Imagine walking in chains for 500 miles to Babylon, driven like cattle! Princesses and princes alike! No luxury buses.

You may say, "It worked! After those disasters and 70 years of captivity in a pagan land, they never again worshipped idols! God finally found the right method." Yes, that's a mark in favor of using the fear motivation.

But did it truly reconcile Israel to God? After they came back and re-built the city and the Second Temple, what did they do? Matthew 26, 27 tells us:

they crucified their Messiah. The old covenant had finally run its full course.

Are we replaying Israel's old covenant revivals and reformations? Sober reflection forces an answer: as a body we are as lukewarm now as we were a century ago. When "we" "in a great degree" and "in a great measure" rejected that "most precious" new covenant truth that came in the 1888 era, "we" locked ourselves into "many more years" of an old covenant detour as surely as did Israel at Sinai.<sup>5</sup>

The faith-experience of the new covenant was the main focus of leadership-opposition to the 1888 message. While they opposed Jones and Waggoner, they actually preferred the essential motifs of the old covenant. Ellen White was shown in vision that these revered leaders were wasting their time trying to urge a view different from Waggoner's, for she was "shown" that he was right.<sup>6</sup> Especially in 1890 and on until 1907 the opposition to the 1888 Good News view of the two covenants won the day.<sup>7</sup>

Motif analysis can demonstrate that old covenant ideas have continued to predominate in our experience, especially in our children's lessons and literature. Even our Commentary leans to the view

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<sup>5</sup> See Letter 184, 1901; *Evangelism*, p. 696.

<sup>6</sup> See Ellen White Letters 30, 59, 1890; also George Knight, *Angry Saints*, pp. 75, 76, 92, 93.

<sup>7</sup> See Sabbath School Lessons, Third Quarter, 1907; letter of A. T. Jones to their author, R. S. Owen, Feb. 20, 1908.

of those who rejected the 1888 message.<sup>8</sup> Our revivals and reformations have followed the pattern of those of Israel, including the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. Not yet have we as a church body truly recovered the new covenant which “we” largely rejected a century ago. The famine predominates alike in both orthodox and “independent” ministries.

Who can estimate the confusion and tragic apostasies that have come because of the unsatisfied hunger within the church (and the world) for that “most precious” gospel? Speaking of Uzzah irreverently grabbing the sacred ark, Ellen White in 1890 pleaded with her brethren, “Take your hand off the ark of God, and *let the Spirit of God come in and work in mighty power*” (1888 Materials, p. 543).

That little word “let” means that the Holy Spirit is eager to go to “work.” When that new covenant message is rescued from the oblivion of the archives, He can feed it like heavenly manna to our famishing world.

A converted Jew likened his people’s problem to a farmer driving a horse and wagon to town. A wheel falls off; does he look for it further ahead down the road, or does he go back to where it fell off?

If the Jews must recover what they lost 2000 years ago, is it too humiliating for us to go back and recover what we lost a century ago?

Going back to retrieve what he lost would be the farmer’s only hope, wouldn’t it?

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<sup>8</sup> See article “Covenant,” SDA Bible Dictionary, p. 229; this statement aptly defines the Commentary position as basically the same as those who rejected.

(1) My purpose in quoting what she said about the 1888 “brethren” is not to accuse them or denigrate them. I cherish confidence in the Lord’s leading in our denominational history and I respect our principles of organization, under God. I have no sympathy with an iconoclastic spirit that would besmirch the reputation of honored leaders of the past, nor have I ever questioned the personal devotion or integrity of the 1888 leaders who opposed the message.

My purpose is to understand “the way the Lord has led us . . . in our past history” (LS 196) so that we of our generation can profit from the mistakes that delayed the finishing of the Lord’s work then. A nation that does not know the reality of its true history is fated to repeat it, and that famous dictum applies to a denomination also. This is why we must understand how and why those dear brethren rejected the “beginning” of the latter rain and insulted the Holy Spirit. We need the “final atonement”:

(2) Please understand that I have never said that the denomination as a whole rejected the historic Protestant doctrine of justification by faith as Spurgeon, Moody, and other 19th century Evangelicals taught it, or as the 16th century Reformers did. Neither have I said that the General Conference leadership rejected that doctrine. Ellen White said the 1888 message was far more than that—it was the “beginning” of the latter rain and the loud cry of Rev 18. That was what the brethren resisted, rejected, neglected, kept away from the world, etc. And that was not 100%; it was “in a great

measure” and “in a great degree” (1 SM 234, 235), but effective enough to delay the Lord’s work for generations. This is why we must sort out the dichotomies of the “many” and the “few,” for it is unreasonable to assume that a “few” opposers in Battle Creek could exert so baleful an influence if “many” in the General Conference, the General Conference Association, and the Review and Herald, were truly loyal to the Lord’s leading.

(3) The honor of the Lord is at stake in this matter for if *He* has delayed His coming, that is one thing; if “*we* have delayed it, then the truth ought to be fully known. The only way Ellen White’s credibility as the Lord’s messenger can be given its due respect is to recognize frankly how “*we*” failed. She said it must “someday” be fully disclosed (GCB, 1893, p. 184). Any attempt to whitewash our 1888 brethren in this history must inevitably confuse the church’s appreciation of her prophetic integrity and weaken our heart preparation for the second advent.

What I have been concerned about is not looking back at the history of 1888 with a preoccupation for it, but accepting the “most precious message” so we can face the future prepared for the final crisis. Nevertheless, I must be honest and confess that I believe the history is vitally important. George Santayana had it right when he said that those who do not know the past are fated to repeat it. And LS 196 agrees. In particular it is dead wrong to misrepresent or distort the past, against the all too common policy of misrepresenting our 1888 history. Fortunately we have a very authentic record of our

true history in the writings of EGW. Her 1800 pages about it recently published are clear as sunlight. If EGW exercised the gift of prophecy, her viewpoint is that of the testimony of Jesus, and it is accurate. What finally validates our identity as the remnant church of prophecy is Christ’s appeal in the Laodicean message, His rebuke for our feeling “rich and increased with goods.” The Greek makes clear that a misinterpretation of our history is the root cause of our pathetic problem.

My conviction is that the actual content and true history of the 1888 message must figure into that corporate experience.

Sacred history does not support the idea that the majority have ever been on the side of truth. Then too, the church does not know what our true history is. They have not had an opportunity to learn. The parallel at this point between ourselves as a people and the Jews is most solemn.

Depending on man has been the great weakness of the church. Men have dishonored God by failing to appreciate His sufficiency, by coveting the influence of man. Thus Israel became weak. The people wanted to be like the other nations of the world, and they asked for a king. They desired to be guided by human power which they could see rather than by the divine Theocracy, the invisible power which till then had led and guided them, and given them victory in battle. They made their own choice, and the result was soon in the destruction of Jerusalem and the dispersion of the nation.—EGW Ms. 159, 1899.