

Footsteps of the Pioneers: Joseph Bates

Valley Center Seventh-day Adventist Church

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A number of decades ago Alex Haley penned his classic book, Roots, tracing his heritage back to Africa. As Seventh-day Adventists, we need to know our roots, our special heritage. Wrote the servant of the Lord many years ago, "We have nothing to fear for the future, except as we shall forget the way the Lord has led and His teaching in our past history." Life Sketches, p. 196. How the devil would like us to forget it! From time to time, about once a month, we're going to take a look at some of the people who led out in the development of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. We're not doing this to praise or uplift these men and women, for they were erring sinners like all of us. It's not the people that were pure and sinless, but the Savior and the special truths for these last days given them. But we need to know positively that this movement was led by God and has a specific role in His work during these closing hours of earth's history. We need to have a sense of the reason for our existence.

The devil would be very happy for us to lose our sense of identity and come to the conclusion that the Seventh-day Adventist Church is "just one of many," that aside from a few tweaks and turns there's not much difference between our church and the other churches out there. That's not true! Don't believe it for an instant! You and I are privileged to be part of a movement that was birthed by God Himself, a movement that finds its story written in prophecy of Scripture. My recommendation to all is to read everything you can about the people whom God used to raise up this church.

In the Holy Bible we find that a large portion of Scripture is devoted to a historical review of God's leadership. Before Moses ascended the heights of Nebo to lay his armor down he delivered his last powerful speech, which we know as the book of Deuteronomy. It is a review of God's hand in the movement that led from Egypt on the way to Canaan. In many of the psalms we find the theme of God's leadership in history to be prominent. We call these "historical" or "national" psalms. In the New Testament we find Gospel champions like Stephen in Acts 7 and Paul in Acts 22 reviewing the history of God's hand in the formation of Israel, and the book of Acts itself is a history of how God raised up the New Testament Church.

We need to review our history, our "roots" to be confirmed in knowledge that God led in the development of this unique church. The pioneers were pleased to call the message they bore to the earth "present truth," taking that phrase from Peter's admonition, "I will not be negligent to remind you always of these things, though you know them, and are established in the present truth." II Peter 1:12.

Our spiritual forefathers knew that what they had to share with the world was a unique and vital message. It was present truth. That phrase even was used as the title of one of their magazines. They reasoned that there was "present truth" in the Garden of Eden. It was, "Don't eat the fruit from the forbidden tree." There was "present truth in the time of Noah. It was, "Get into the boat." There was present truth in the time of Elijah. It was "Don't worship Baal." There was present truth in the days of John the Baptist. It was, "Jesus is the Messiah of prophecy, the Lamb of God." Even so God had been pleased to give to this small company of believers a message of present truth, contained in the messages of the three angels of Revelation 14.

Of this present truth they were passionate and zealous. The level of their devotion and sacrifice puts us to shame. In the 1890's, Frederick Bishop and Thomas Davis felt called to share these truths with people in Chile. They went with little more than the clothes they were wearing and some books in a box. They knew no Spanish. Through a dream given by God they were introduced to two brothers, Edward and Victor Thomann, who accepted the message. These were inspired to become colporteurs themselves. They didn't have a lot of money and at one time they had one pair of shoes between them! Not a problem. One brother would wear the shoes and go out and share with people while the other brother stayed home in bare feet and prayed. Then they would trade off, and the praying brother would wear the shoes and go out to reach people. These people felt the urgency of the message, and we can be inspired by their examples!

Today we'll take a brief look at the life and ministry of Joseph Bates, considered to be one of the co-founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Much of the material I'm sharing with you today has been gleaned from the SDA Bible Commentary volume 10, the Encyclopedia, from Tell It To The World, by Mervyn Maxwell and from A Brief History of Seventh-day Adventists by George Knight. He was born in 1792, just after the birth of our nation. Washington had been president only 3 years. When in his mid-teens, he left his home in Fairhaven, Massachusetts to pursue a career at sea, his father hoping that he would have a tough time of it and change his mind. That first trip he fell overboard and had to be rescued before a shark, on the other side of the ship could find him. On his second venture he was impressed into service by the British Royal Navy, something that ignited the fuse of the war of 1812. For the next 5 years, to the very day, he was retained by them, half of the time serving as a sailor and the other 2 ½ years being a prisoner of war, being released at the end of the war of 1812.

He continued his life on the ocean after the war, becoming a merchant seaman and a captain in 1820. Two years before that, he married his sweetheart Prudence Nye. His life seemed full of adventure. Once when checking on the chains attached to the ship's anchor, his rowboat was tugged by a current out to the open sea as it was nearing darkness. So sure was the captain that Bates was gone for good that a burial service was held for him!

His life was a progression of many small, or not so small steps. In 1821 he gave up hard liquor. On his next voyage, he gave up wine and later gave up tobacco, both chewing and smoking. God was at work in his life, though he didn't know it! In subsequent years, one by one different things dropped from his routine. He gave up tea and coffee and in 1843 became a vegetarian. He became a health reformer who was far ahead of his time, and

enjoyed the benefits it brought him. Even in his later years he was known as being in excellent health and a man of spry step. James White said of him, "He stood straight as a monument and would walk the sidewalks as lightly as a fox." He lived to be 80, a ripe old age in that era. He traveled more but was sick less than the rest of the Adventist pioneers. Once when he was 65 years old he baptized 7 people in a river, a frozen river. A hole had to be cut through 3 feet of ice, and the temperature was said to be 30 below zero!

Back to his earlier life, in 1824 as he was preparing to go on another trip, his wife slipped a copy of the New Testament into his trunk. The death of one his crew brought serious thinking to his mind, and he began a pattern of daily Bible study and prayer. If you do that, expect change! He gave his heart to the Lord and was converted. When he returned from his voyage he was baptized and in 1827 joined the Fairhaven Christian Church, the church his wife belonged to.

After his conversion, as he prepared for what would be his last voyage, Bates the sea captain commanded a "temperate vessel," not allowing drinking, swearing or washing of clothes on Sunday. On his ship the captain led out in daily worship, and saw two of his crew give their hearts to the Lord on that voyage, which was the voyage with least incident of quarrels or squabbles of any during his career. Thereafter many of the ships that sailed from New Bedford, Fairhaven and other nearby harbors followed Bate's example.

He had promised his wife Prudence that when he had saved \$10,000.00, a huge sum of money in that day, he would leave his career as sea captain and retire. This goal he reached in the year 1828. Thereafter he tried his hand at being a silk farmer and became involved in reform movements of different types. Naturally, he became involved in the Temperance movement. He also applied his shoulder to the anti-slavery, or abolitionist cause.

In 1839 Bates heard the message being shared by William Miller, the Baptist farmer who spoke so ardently about the Second Coming of Jesus. According to Miller's prophetic calculations, the Savior was expected to return to cleanse the sanctuary of this earth by fire in the year 1843, later revised to be the year 1844. From his involvement in the temperance work Bates was already acquainted with Joshua V. Himes, one of the Advent promoters. After hearing Miller's message, Bates devoted his whole being to sharing it with others. In the year 1840 was part of a committee that called for the first General Conference at Boston on the Second Advent. Soon after this he became a Millerite preacher himself.

In 1843 Bates sold his home and most of his other real estate so that he would be free to go wherever the Lord led in the preaching of the message. A blacksmith with a good voice by the name of H. S. Gurney went with him as his singing evangelist, one of their venues being Kent Island in Chesapeake Bay where he had once been shipwrecked. Things didn't go quite well this time either, with a heckler interrupting his preaching. When the disturbing voice threatened to have him and his companion ridden out of town on a rail, Bates calmly replied, "If you will put a saddle on it, we would rather ride than walk." The audience laughed and made the heckler sit down.

Bates was many of those who experienced the Great Disappointment of October 22, 1844, but he didn't abandon his faith. Left penniless that fall, Joseph quieted his wife's anxious spirit with the admonition, "The Lord will provide." And He did! Shortly after this he read an article written by T. M Preble that would change his life.

It happened this way. A lady by the name of Rachel Oaks, a devout Seventh-day Baptist, was visiting her 19 year old daughter Delight who had just taken a teaching position in Washington, New Hampshire. It was early in the year 1844. There not being a Sabbath keeping church nearby, she and her daughter kept the Sabbath at home and then Rachel attended the local Sunday church for fellowship. This congregation had accepted the teachings of William Miller and were looking for Christ's soon return. A circuit riding preacher by the name of Frederick Wheeler had come from Hillsboro, some 12 miles away, to give the sermon that Sunday and he said something that made Mrs. Oaks almost jump from her pew.

Later, Pastor Wheeler called on the family and Mrs. Oaks shared her conviction. "While you were speaking, Elder Wheeler, I could scarcely contain myself. You said that we must observe all of the Ten Commandments, and yet you yourself constantly break one of them!" When the pastor asked what she meant by that, she replied, "I mean that the fourth commandment says, 'The seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord thy God,' but you keep the first day. You observe the pope's Sunday instead of the Lord's Sabbath!"

During that same winter, Wheeler became the first Sabbath-keeping Adventist minister. Later in August of 1844 he discussed this with another pastor by the name of Thomas M. Preble, a freewill Baptist from the town of Weare, New Hampshire, about 12 miles from Hillsboro. Preble accepted the Sabbath and wrote about it in a little tract he published called "Hope of Israel" in February 1845, which he later revised and retitled as "Tract Showing that the Seventh Day Should Be Observed as the Sabbath." A copy of this article found its way into the hands of Joseph Bates who dropped everything he was doing and immediately began an extensive search into the Bible to see whether these things were so. He made the 140 mile trip from Paris, Maine to Hillsboro to personally meet Frederick Wheeler, arriving late and waking up the whole family, studying the Bible with him through the rest of the night.

A short struggle ensued in Bate's heart as he contemplated the struggles this change would bring, but a verse of Scripture kept ringing in his mind, Christ's admonition "What is that to thee? Follow thou Me." Bates determined to obey God. Shortly thereafter he was crossing the bridge between New Bedford and Fairhaven when a gentleman by the auspicious name of James Madison Monroe Hall approached him on the bridge, giving out the cheery call, "What's the news?" Bates replied with conviction, "The News, is that the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord our God." Hall kept his very first Sabbath that week!

Preble's tract was not the only one Bate's read. He also read an articles by O. R. L. Crossier from the "Day-Star Extra" of February 1845 and was persuaded that something of importance did indeed happen on October 22, 1844, but it wasn't Christ coming to the sanctuary of this earth to cleanse it by fire. It was instead, Christ's entering the Most Holy Place of the heavenly sanctuary to begin a ministry of cleansing the hearts and records of

His people. Again, not content with just reading the tract, he traveled to Port Gibson near Buffalo and Syracuse, nearly 400 miles away, to personally meet with Crossier, Hiram Edson, and others. After their meeting, Bates knew more about the sanctuary message, and the others knew about the seventh-day Sabbath! In 1846 he authored the very helpful, "The Seventh Day Sabbath, A Perpetual Sign," a tract which won many, including James and Ellen White on the Sabbath question.

Being used to moving about on the sea, Bates now moved about the land to share this light with others, willing to talk with anyone who would listen. Being about 30 years older than James and Ellen White, Bates was asked to chair most of the important committees and meetings till 1863 when the Church was officially formed. He continued to be "Captain Bates." And the reformer continued to reform. By 1844 he had discarded tea, coffee, meat and rich desserts, but didn't urge his views on others, preferring to let his life be an example. After Sister White received her vision on health, Bates allowed himself to speak more opening on these things. At 79 he could say, "I am entirely free from aches and pains."

Another publication that Bates authored was "A Vindication of the Sabbath," written in 1847. His cash reserves at this time had dwindled down to a single York shilling, a precarious situation of which his wife was not aware. Doing some baking one day, she requested that he go to the market and get some flour. When he returned with 4 pounds of flour she confronted him. "Have you, Captain Bates, a man who sailed vessels out of New Bedford to all parts of the world, been out and bought 4 pounds of flour?" He calmly replied, "Wife, I spent for this food the last money I had on earth." Prudence began to sob bitterly and asked, "What are we going to do?"

Bates stood to his feet and said, "I am going to write a book and spread the Sabbath truth before the world." "But what are we going to live on?" "The Lord will open the way." "Oh, 'The Lord will open the way! The Lord will open the way!' That's what you always say!" She left the room weeping.

Within about ½ hour Bates had a strong impression to go to the post office. When he arrived, there was indeed a letter, but with 5 cents postage due. Bates was embarrassed to tell the postal clerk that he had no money. The clerk offered that he should take it and pay the 5 cents another time, but this was against Bate's strong principles.

"I won't take the letter until the postage is paid," he said. "But I am of the opinion that there might be money in the letter. Could you open it? If there is money, take the postage first." Mr. Drew, the postman agreed and opened the letter, which contained a ten-dollar bill! Bates went to the store and bought a barrel of flour, potatoes, sugar and other things, but told the store keeper to deliver them to his address, even if his wife questioned what was happening or gave a strange look.

Arriving home, he slipped into his study quietly to work on his new book. His wife came into the room and said excitedly, "Joseph, look on the front porch! Where did all that stuff come from? I told the delivery man it didn't belong here, but he insisted on unloading it." Bates replied, "Well, I guess it's alright." "But where did it come from?" "The Lord sent it." "The Lord sent it, the Lord sent it! That's what you always say!" Bates showed her the

letter and told her the story of the ten dollars it contained. He never learned where the money came from, but decades later, after this saint had passed to his rest, it was discovered that it had been sent by H. S. Gurney, the blacksmith and Bate's former singing evangelist friend in the day of Millerite preaching. It seems that Gurney had been fired and his employer had refused to pay his back wages. Now, at just the right time, he relented and Gurney shared his blessing with Bates.

Bates also authored, "A Seal of the Living God", "The Opening Heavens" (on the sanctuary message) and "Second Advent Waymarks and High Heaps." In 1852 he traveled to Battle Creek Michigan. Arriving early in the morning, he inquired as to who was the most honest man in town, and was directed to a Presbyterian man by the name of David Hewitt. Soon Bates was at Hewitt's home, rapping on his door, telling him that he had important Bible truth to share with him. That home became the first meeting place for Sabbath keeping Adventists in Battle Creek, Michigan, a place that later would be home to the famous Dime Tabernacle, seating some 2,500 souls. No, he wasn't perfect. He had a few warts and wrinkles like all of us. But thank God for Joseph Bates, the sea captain whom God used in formation of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Would that we had his zeal and devotion!