

Testing *the* Prophets



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Isa. 8:20; Jer. 18:6–10; Jonah 3; 4; Matt. 7:20; Gal. 2:11–14.*

Memory Text: “Do not despise prophecies. Test all things; hold fast what is good” (*1 Thessalonians 5:20, 21, NKJV*).

Fundamental Belief number 18 states, “One of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is prophecy. This gift is an identifying mark of the remnant church and was manifested in the ministry of Ellen G. White, the Lord’s messenger. Her writings are a continuing and authoritative source of truth which provide for the church comfort, guidance, instruction, and correction. They also make clear that the Bible is the standard by which all teaching and experience must be tested.”—*Seventh-day Adventists Believe . . .* (2nd ed.) (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press® Publishing Association, 2005), p. 247. (*See Joel 2:28, 29; Acts 2:14–21; Heb. 1:1–3; Rev. 12:17; 19:10*).

Although Mrs. White never called herself a prophetess, the church has recognized her as such. In 1905 she wrote: “Others have called me a prophetess, but I have never assumed that title. I have not felt that it was my duty thus to designate myself.”—*Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 36. This week we’ll look a little closer at her prophetic gift.

The Week at a Glance: How did God communicate to His prophets? What are the biblical tests of a true prophet? What is *conditional prophecy*? Are prophets infallible? Why do we believe that Ellen G. White’s visions and prophetic dreams were from God?

*Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 7.

Dreams and Visions

“And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions” (*Joel 2:28*).

How did God communicate with individuals whom He called to prophetic office? *Gen. 15:1, Num. 12:6–8, Dan. 7:1.*

In Scripture we learn that God primarily used dreams and visions to communicate with His messengers. Prophetic dreams played an important role in the time of the patriarchs (*Genesis 20–41*), in the ministry of Daniel (*Daniel 1–7*), and in the Nativity narratives (*Matt. 1:20; 2:12, 19, 22*). Visions frequently are mentioned in the writings of the prophets (*Isa. 1:1, Ezek. 1:1, Dan. 8:1, Obad. 1:1, Nah. 1:1*) and in the book of Acts (*9:10, 10:3, 11:5, 16:9, 18:9*).

During her 70-year ministry (1844–1915) Ellen White received an estimated two thousand visions and prophetic dreams. “At times I am carried far ahead into the future and shown what is to take place. Then again I am shown things as they have occurred in the past. After I come out of vision I do not at once remember all that I have seen, and the matter is not so clear before me until I write, then the scene rises before me as was presented in vision, and I can write with freedom.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 36.

Often her visions were given while she was in the presence of others, who observed certain physical phenomena—she did not breathe, she had supernatural strength (no one could move her limbs), and she was unconscious of her surroundings. Adventists and non-Adventists have testified to the supernatural character of her visions. At the General Conference session in 1893, J. N. Loughborough said: “I have seen Sister White in vision about fifty times. . . . She has been examined while in vision by skillful physicians, and we have testimonials from them which declare that the phenomena of her visions are beyond their comprehension.”—*General Conference Daily Bulletin*, January 29, 1893.

What’s been your experience with Ellen White’s writings? In what ways have they impacted your spiritual life? Put aside any preconceived notions that you might have about her published works, and just read some of them. What can they tell you about the author?

Agreement With the Bible

What is one of the most important tests of a true prophet? *Isa. 8:20*. Why should this be so important?

Law (Heb. *torah*) is the common biblical term for the inspired writings of Moses (*Deut. 4:44, 31:9*); the *testimony* refers to the witness of the prophets (*2 Chron. 23:11, John 3:32*). In other words, what a prophet says must harmonize with what God has revealed already. Though later prophets may reveal additional insights regarding the plan of salvation, they will not contradict what God has said before. God's unchangeableness (*Mal. 3:6*) is at stake in His revelations to humanity.

An example of this test of a true prophet is given in Jeremiah 28. Jeremiah prophesied that Israel would serve the king of Babylon 70 years (*Jer. 25:11*). A few years into the 70 years, Hananiah the son of Azur claimed otherwise: "In the presence of the priests and of all the people, saying, 'Thus speaks the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, saying: "I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon. Within two full years I will bring back to this place all the vessels of the Lord's house . . . with all the captives of Judah who went to Babylon," says the Lord' " (*Jer. 28:1-4, NKJV*). Because this was not in harmony with what God had told Jeremiah previously, God gave another message to Jeremiah: "Hear now, Hananiah, the Lord has not sent you, but you make this people trust in a lie. Therefore thus says the Lord: ' . . . This year you shall die, because you have taught rebellion against the Lord.' So Hananiah the prophet died the same year in the seventh month" (*Jer. 28:15-17, NKJV*).

Every true prophet has made the writings of previous prophets the benchmark for his or her own ministry. The same is true for Ellen White. Anyone familiar with her books can testify that she used Scripture profusely. She immersed herself in the Bible and constantly referred to the biblical text, and what she wrote is in agreement with the Bible. Although she was not a theologian and did not write an exegetical commentary on the Bible, her message is in harmony with the message of Scripture.

Why must harmony with the Bible be our final test of everything moral, spiritual, and theological? Why must we have a final authority, especially in spiritual and theological matters?

Fulfilled Prophecy

Read Jeremiah 18:6–10. What important principle regarding the fulfillment of predictions is found here?

The proof of a true prophet lies, in part, in the fulfillment of his or her predictions (*see 1 Sam. 9:6, Jer. 28:9, Lam. 3:37*). At the same time, though, not all predictions come to pass if the people involved have a change of heart. It's what is known as conditional prophecy, and it's important for us to understand.

Study Jonah 3 and 4. What must be taken into consideration in applying the test of fulfilled prophecy?

The fulfillment of most prophecies (exceptions are the end-time prophecies of Daniel and Revelation) is dependent on the actions and attitudes of the people concerned. Jonah made the clear-cut statement, given to him from God, that in 40 days Nineveh would be “overturned” (*Jonah 3:4, NIV*). Yet, it never happened. Was Jonah a false prophet? Of course not. Instead, the prophecy was conditional—its fulfillment depended upon how the people responded to the message God had given them.

This principle may explain why a particular prophecy made by Ellen White did not come to pass. In 1856, Mrs. White declared: “I was shown the company present at the Conference. Said the angel: ‘Some food for worms, some subjects of the seven last plagues, some will be alive and remain upon the earth to be translated at the coming of Jesus.’” —*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1, pp. 131, 132.

All who were alive way back then are now, of course, dead. How do we explain this? The answer is conditional prophecy. We must remember that she was told God's kingdom could have come in her lifetime. In 1896 she wrote: “If those who claimed to have a living experience in the things of God had done their appointed work as the Lord ordained, the whole world would have been warned ere this, and the Lord Jesus would have come in power and great glory.”—*Review and Herald*, Oct. 6, 1896.

In the last volume of the *Testimonies for the Church*, published in 1909, she wrote, “If every soldier of Christ had done his duty, if every watchman on the walls of Zion had given the trumpet a certain sound, the world might ere this have heard the message of warning. But the work is years behind. While men have slept, Satan has stolen a march upon us.”—*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 9, p. 29. If we apply the principle of conditionality to her 1856 vision, the problem disappears. See also Friday's lesson.

Confessing Jesus, the God-man

What was one of the issues John faced in his time; and what does he say is another mark of a true prophet? *1 John 4:1, 2.*

One of the problems in John's day was the question over the human nature of Christ. Was He really flesh and blood, or did He, as some taught, only appear to have a body? To understand and confess that Jesus was truly human became so important to John that he declared it to be a test of a true prophet.

This test is broader than simply believing that Jesus became a human being. It includes everything the Bible teaches about Jesus. He took on humanity for a purpose. He became man in order to live a sinless life and then die for sinful humanity. But more than that, He became man so that after His resurrection and ascension He could minister for us in the heavenly sanctuary. Our High Priest is one who is able to understand us and can sympathize with our weaknesses, because He was tempted in every way human beings are tempted (*Heb. 4:14, 15*).

Every true prophet will point people to Jesus, the God-man, who is the Savior and example of all humanity. Ellen G. White's life was devoted to doing just that. She wrote, "Jesus Christ is everything to us,—the first, the last, the best in everything. Jesus Christ, His Spirit, His character, colors everything; it is the warp and woof, the very texture of our entire being. . . . Christ is a living Saviour. Continuing to look unto Jesus, we reflect His image to all around us."—*Messages to Young People*, p. 161.

Why is it so important that true prophets exalt Jesus Christ? *Acts 4:12.*

The ecumenical spirit and postmodern thinking have permeated almost all Christian churches today, in the process eroding the uniqueness of Christianity and especially the importance of Jesus Christ as Savior of the world. In contrast, Ellen White wrote: "The only hope for fallen man is to look to Jesus and receive Him as the only Saviour."—*Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 367. "Only Bible truth and Bible religion will stand the test of the judgment."—*Fundamentals of Christian Education*, p. 127. "Let us lift up Jesus, the Saviour of men. Talk of his love, tell of his power."—*Signs of the Times*, March 18, 1889. See also Friday's study.

The Orchard Test

What did Jesus say in the Sermon on the Mount about how true prophets can be identified? *Matt. 7:20.*

The context of this statement is Jesus' warning to the disciples to beware of false prophets (*Matt. 7:15*). Jesus applied the principle—that a good tree bears good fruit—to the life of the prophets. What kind of fruit do they bring forth? What influence do their teachings have on others?

The orchard test takes time. Ellen White lived and worked for 70 years under the critical eyes of millions of people, largely skeptical, doubtful, suspicious, and in some cases openly hostile. Errors, faults, and inconsistencies were and still are exposed with great satisfaction by her opponents. God alone is flawless; His messengers never are.

What do these texts tell us about the character flaws of some people who had the prophetic gift? *Gen. 12:12, 13; Jon. 1:1–3; Acts 15:36–39; Gal. 2:11–14.*

Being a prophet, of course, does not make a person infallible or sinless. Mrs. White made mistakes and had character weaknesses, as did other people, but the trend of her life was such that at her death a local non-Adventist newspaper reported, “The life of Mrs. White is an example worthy of emulation by all. . . . She was a humble, devout disciple of Christ and ever went about doing good. . . . Her death marks the calling of another noted leader of religious thought and one whose almost ninety years were full to overflowing with good deeds, kind words and earnest prayers for all mankind.”—“Called to Her Reward,” *St. Helena Star* (Calif.), July 23, 1915.

Some people have difficulties accepting her prophetic ministry because they stumble over certain details of her writings but fail to see the bigger picture: the way God used her to raise up this church, the many wonderful insights she received from God, and the contributions she has made to this church.

What are the great advantages of having the prophetic gift manifested among us? What are potential challenges it brings?

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “The Bible Prophets Wrote for Our Time,” pp. 338, 339, in *Selected Messages*, book 3; Arthur L. White, “Make It Known to Others,” pp. 60–72, in *The Early Years: 1827–1862*.

“As the subject was presented before me, the period of Christ’s ministration seemed almost accomplished. Am I accused of falsehood because time has continued longer than my testimony seemed to indicate? How is it with the testimonies of Christ and His disciples? Were they deceived?

“Paul writes to the Corinthians: ‘But this I say, brethren, the time is short: it remaineth, that both they that have wives be as though they had none; and they that weep, as though they wept not; and they that rejoice, as though they rejoiced not’ (1 Cor. 7:29, 30).

“Again, in his epistle to the Romans, he says: ‘The night is far spent, the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light’ (Rom. 13:12). . . .

“The angels of God in their messages to men represent time as very short. Thus it has always been presented to me. It is true that time has continued longer than we expected in the early days of this message. Our Saviour did not appear as soon as we hoped. But has the word of the Lord failed? Never! It should be remembered that the promises and threatenings of God are alike conditional.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 67.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Why have some Seventh-day Adventists lost confidence in Ellen White’s prophetic ministry? Could part of the problem be with how her work has been presented? Discuss.
- ❷ Take some of your favorite excerpts from her writings and read them again. What was it about them that you liked so much? What is the message she is giving in these sections? Bring your selections to class and share them.
- ❸ Some people use the writings of Ellen White as the final authority on every point. Why is that wrong? What great dangers does such an attitude present to our church? What are some ways this wonderful gift has been, and still is, abused in the church? What have been some of the results?

Excited About God

by NONHLANHLA KHUMALO

I attend an Adventist secondary school in Zimbabwe. I love sharing my faith with others, but it hasn't always been that way. At first it was hard for me to tell others what God was doing in my life. But as I prayed and studied the Bible, I became more certain of my faith and wanted to share it with others. I started with my twin brother. He's a Christian, but he didn't attend a Pathfinder camp I went to near Victoria Falls. At that camp I learned to make prayer and Bible study part of each day. And I heard stories of miracles God was doing in people's lives. I went home excited about God.

I started telling my brother what God meant to me. The more I shared, the more eager I was for him to experience the joy of sharing his faith.

When I started studying in this school, I joined the Christian Service Band. We went to a village about an hour away to hold Sabbath services. We rode in an open truck pulled by a tractor to reach the village. The dirt road spit dust onto us, but we didn't mind. We passed the time singing songs and talking about God. When we arrived, we brushed the dust off our clothes and entered the church. The church members knew we were coming, but other villagers watched curiously as we walked into the church.

I was a little nervous my first time there, and I asked God to help me teach the younger children their Bible lesson. We had no felts or no picture rolls, but the children listened carefully as we told them the Bible story. Then I read the story of the boy Samuel from my Bible. Few of the children prayed at home, so we taught them to pray and urged them to pray every day at home. I was surprised at how little these children knew about God and His love for them.

After Sabbath School and church, we divided up into teams and visited every home. We talked and prayed with the people and invited them to the evangelistic meetings that would start soon in the village.

It was late afternoon when we returned to the school, and I was hungry and dusty. But I was happy that we could make a difference in the lives of these villagers.

I want to continue visiting that village and watch people respond to God. In the meantime, I am praying that the people will see the light of God's love in our lives and in the lives of believers living in the village.

I invite you to join us in sharing God's love with these villagers through your mission offerings and your prayers.

Nonhlanhla Khumalo is a student living in Zimbabwe.

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