

End-Time Deceptions



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matt. 7:21–27, John 11:40–44, 1 Pet. 3:18, 1 Sam. 28:3–25, Eph. 6:10–18.*

Memory Text: “And no wonder! Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is not strange if his ministers also disguise themselves as ministers of righteousness. Their end will match their deeds” (2 Corinthians 11:14, 15, NRSV).

Our contemporary world has become a melting pot of the supernatural and the mystical, helped on by Hollywood, which has no problem making movies with religious and mystical themes in a hodgepodge of error and deception. The old lie “‘You surely will not die!’” (*Gen. 3:4, NASB*) also has inspired some of the most-read books and most-watched movies of the past few decades, and many popular video games, as well. Undeniably, we are exposed to and tempted by the enchanted ground of Satan, which can appear in myriad forms and even, in some cases, can come hidden under the veneer of science.

One of the most deceptive phenomena has been what have been called “near death” experiences (NDEs), where those who had “died” have come back to life with stories of an afterlife. Many people have seen these events as proof of an immortal soul!

During this week, we will consider some end-time deceptions, including mysticism, near-death experiences, reincarnation, necromancy and ancestor worship, and others. These are dangerous subjects that we should be aware of but without exposing ourselves to their influences.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 10.

Mysticism

Our world has been flooded by the strong waves of mysticism. The word “mysticism” is a complex term that encapsulates a huge variety of ideas. From a religious perspective, the word implies the union of the individual with the Divine or Absolute in some kind of spiritual experience or trance. This characterizes the worship experience even of certain churches. The phenomena can vary in form and intensity, but the tendency always is to replace the authority of the Written Word of God with one’s own subjective experiences. In any case, the Bible loses much of its doctrinal function, and the Christian remains vulnerable to his or her own experiences. This kind of subjective religion does not provide a safeguard against any deception, especially end-time ones.

Read Matthew 7:21–27. In light of Jesus’ own words, what does it mean to build our spiritual house “on the rock” or to build it “on the sand”?

There is a strong tendency in the postmodern Christian world to downplay the relevance of biblical doctrines, regarding them as tedious echoes of an obsolete form of religion. In this process, the *teachings* of Christ are artificially replaced by the *person* of Christ—arguing, for instance, that some biblical story or another cannot be true because Jesus, as they perceive Him, would never have allowed that to happen as it is written. Personal feelings and taste end up being the criteria for interpreting the Scriptures or even for rejecting outright what the Bible clearly teaches, often about obedience to God, which as Jesus said is so essential to building one’s house on the rock.

Those who think that it matters not what they believe in doctrine, so long as they believe in Jesus Christ, are on dangerous ground. The Roman inquisitors who condemned to death untold numbers of Protestants believed in Jesus Christ. Those who had “cast out demons” in Christ’s name (*Matt. 7:22, NKJV*) had believed in Him. “The position that it is of no consequence what men believe is one of Satan’s most successful deceptions. He knows that the truth, received in the love of it, sanctifies the soul of the receiver; therefore he is constantly seeking to substitute false theories, fables, another gospel.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 520.

How can we fight the very human tendency to let our emotions and desires cause us to do things contrary to the Word of God?

Near-Death Experiences

Some of the most popular modern arguments to “prove” the theory of the natural immortality of the soul are “near-death experiences.” In his book *Life After Life: The Investigation of a Phenomenon—Survival of Bodily Death* (Atlanta, GA: Mockingbird, 1975), Raymond A. Moody, Jr., presented the results of his five-year study of more than one hundred people who experienced “clinical death” and were revived. These individuals claimed to have seen a loving and warm being of light before coming back to life. This has been regarded as “exciting evidence of the survival of the human spirit beyond death” (back cover). Over the years, many other similar books have been published, promoting the same idea. (See lesson 2.)

Read the resurrection accounts of 1 Kings 17:22–24, 2 Kings 4:34–37, Mark 5:41–43, Luke 7:14–17, and John 11:40–44. How many of them talk about any kind of conscious existence while the resurrected ones were dead, and why is that answer important?

All near-death experiences reported in modern literature are of people considered *clinically* dead, but not *really* dead, in contrast to Lazarus, who was dead for four days and whose corpse was rotting (*John 11:39*). Neither Lazarus nor any of those raised from the dead in biblical times ever mentioned any afterlife experience, whether in Paradise, in purgatory, or in hell. This is, indeed, an argument from silence, but it is in full agreement with the biblical teachings on the unconscious state of the dead!

But what about the near-death experiences so commonly recounted today? If we accept the biblical teaching of the unconsciousness of the dead (*Job 3:11–13*, *Ps. 115:17*, *Ps. 146:4*, *Eccles. 9:10*), then we are left with two main possibilities: either it is a natural psychochemical hallucination under extreme conditions, or it can be a supernatural, satanic, deceptive experience (*2 Cor. 11:14*). Satanic deception could indeed be the explanation, especially because in some cases, these people claim to have talked to their dead relatives! But it could be a combination of both factors.

With this deception prevalent, and so convincing to many, it is crucial that we stick firmly to the teaching of the Word of God, despite whatever experiences we or others might have that go against what the Bible teaches.

How fascinating that NDEs often now come with the imprimatur of “science.” What does this teach us about how careful we need to be even of things that science supposedly “proves”?

Reincarnation

The pagan notion of an immortal soul provides the foundation for the unbiblical theory of reincarnation or transmigration of the soul. This theory has been adopted by some major world religions. While most Christians believe in the existence of an immortal soul that abides in a permanent heaven or hell after death, those who believe in reincarnation hold that such an immortal soul goes through many cycles of death and rebirth here on earth.

For some, reincarnation is thought to be a process of spiritual evolution that allows the spirit to attain ever greater levels of knowledge and morality in its journey toward perfection. Hindus believe that the eternal soul goes through a progression of consciousness or “*samsara*” in six classes of life: aquatics, plants, reptiles and insects, birds, animals, and human beings, including the residents of heaven.

Read Hebrews 9:25–28 and 1 Peter 3:18. If Jesus died just “once” (*Heb. 9:28, 1 Pet. 3:18, NKJV*) and likewise all human beings die just “once” (*Heb. 9:27, NKJV*), why do even some alleged Christians believe in some form of reincarnation?

Many people believe not in what they *should* believe but in what they *want* to believe. If a theory brings them existential peace and comfort, that is enough to settle the discussion for them. But for those who take the Bible seriously, there is no way to accept the theory of reincarnation.

First, this theory contradicts the biblical teachings of the mortality of the “soul” and the resurrection of the body (*1 Thess. 4:13–18*).

Second, it negates the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ (*Eph. 2:8–10*) and replaces it with human works.

Third, the theory contradicts the biblical teaching that one’s eternal destiny is decided forever by one’s decisions in this life (*Matt. 22:1–14, Matt. 25:31–46*).

Fourth, this theory downplays the meaning and relevance of Christ’s second coming (*John 14:1–3*).

And fifth, the theory proposes after-death opportunities for someone still to overcome his or her own life’s pitfalls, which is unbiblical (*Heb. 9:27*).

In short, there is no place for the idea of reincarnation in the Christian faith.

Necromancy and Ancestor Worship

The word “necromancy” derives from the Greek terms *nekros* (dead) and *manteia* (divination). Practiced since ancient times, necromancy is a form of summoning the alleged active spirits of the dead in order to obtain knowledge, often about future events. Ancestor worship, meanwhile, is the custom of venerating deceased ancestors because they are still considered family, and these spirits can, it is believed, influence the affairs of the living. These pagan practices can be very attractive to those who believe in an immortal soul and who also miss their deceased loved ones.

Read 1 Samuel 28:3–25. What spiritual lessons against any supposed communication with the dead can be drawn from Saul’s experience with the woman medium at Endor?

The Bible stated very clearly that all spiritists, mediums, sorcerers, and necromancers, in the ancient Israelite theocracy, were abominations to the Lord and should be put to death by stoning (*Lev. 19:31; Lev. 20:6, 27; Deut. 18:9–14*). In accordance with this law, Saul had destroyed all mediums and spiritists from Israel (*1 Sam. 28:3, 9*).

But, then, after being rejected by the Lord, Saul himself went to the Canaanite city of Endor to inquire of a woman medium (*1 Sam. 28:6, 7, 15; compare with Josh. 17:11, Ps. 83:10*). He asked her to bring up the deceased prophet Samuel, who supposedly came up in a necromancer apparition and spoke with Saul (*1 Sam. 28:13–19*). The deceiving spirit, who pretended to be Samuel, told Saul, “ ‘Tomorrow you and your sons will be with me’ ” (*1 Sam. 28:19, NKJV*). While predicting Saul’s death, that deceiving spirit, merely by assuming the form of Samuel, reaffirmed the unbiblical theory of the natural immortality of the soul. It was a powerful deception, and Saul should have known better than to become involved with what he had previously condemned.

More than two centuries later, the prophet Isaiah wrote, “And when they say to you, ‘Seek those who are mediums and wizards, who whisper and mutter,’ should not a people seek their God? Should they seek the dead on behalf of the living? To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them” (*Isa. 8:19, 20, NKJV; also Isa. 19:3*).

How often, under stress, do we do things that we know are wrong? Why are faith, prayer, and obedience to the Word of God our only sure defense against ourselves?

Personations and Other Appearances

Similar to necromancy are the demonic personations of the dead and other demonic appearances. The personations can be in the form of a deceased family member, friend, or anyone. Both the physical appearance and the voice are very similar to those of the deceased. All these satanic deceptions will be used to deceive those who are not firmly grounded in God's Word. Ellen G. White warns, "The apostles, as personated by these lying spirits, are made to contradict what they wrote at the dictation of the Holy Spirit when on earth."—*The Great Controversy*, p. 557. And further, "As the crowning act in the great drama of deception, Satan himself will personate Christ."—*The Great Controversy*, p. 624.

Read 2 Corinthians 11:14, 15 and Ephesians 6:10–18. What should be our safeguards against such demonic deceptions?

The apostle Paul warns us that "our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (*Eph. 6:12, NRSV*). We can be protected against these deceptions only by being clothed with "the whole armor of God" (*Eph. 6:13, NKJV*) described in Ephesians 6:13–18.

The satanic personations and appearances can be very frightening and deceiving, but they cannot mislead those who are sheltered by God and grounded in God's Word. From a doctrinal perspective, those who believe in the biblical doctrine of the conditional immortality of human beings know that any appearance of or communication with the dead is of a satanic origin and needs to be rejected by God's powerful grace. Again, no matter how powerful, convincing, and seemingly real the manifestation is, we must always stand firm on the teaching that the dead are asleep in the grave.

Imagine, though, losing a loved one and then believing that this same loved one appears to you. And expresses love to you. And tells you how much they miss you. And says things that, yes, only they would know. And says that they are now in a better place. If a person is not absolutely grounded in what the Bible teaches about the state of the dead, think of how easily he or she could fall for this deception, especially because they *want* to believe it, as well.

What does it mean to put on the "whole armor of God"? In a day-to-day, practical sense, how do we do this in every area of our lives, not just in dealing with end-time deceptions?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “Dealing With False Science, Cults, Isms, and Secret Societies,” pp. 602–609, in *Evangelism*; and “Spiritism,” pp. 86–93, in *Confrontation*.

There exists a foundation which claims that it is creating technology that will allow us to contact the deceased “via texts, phone calls, and video-conferencing.” Calling the dead PMPs (postmaterial persons), its website claims that when humans die they simply pass on “into another phase of forever” but “retain their consciousness, identity, and core aspects of their previous physical form.” But, most important, the folks at the foundation claim to be developing, in three phases, technology that will allow communication between material and postmaterial persons.

The first phase will “allow texting and typing with postmaterial family, friends, and experts in every field of expertise.” Phase two is supposed to “enable talking with your dear ones who are living in another part of forever.” And the third phase, it says, will open the way to “hearing and seeing those who are experiencing the field of all possibilities from a different observation point.”

Especially scary is how they test if the communicating dead are really who they claim to be. “For example,” the site says, “a bereaved parent might ask the following question of a son or a daughter who has changed worlds: ‘Did you have a dog named Snoopy when you were a child? Did we give you a pocketknife for your tenth birthday?’ ” How interesting in light of this warning: “Spiritual beings sometimes appear to persons in the form of their deceased friends, and relate incidents connected with their lives and perform acts which they performed while living.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 684.

Discussion Questions:

- ① Using the excuse of being culturally acceptable, many Christians consume whatever the media promotes. Which biblical principles should guide our relationship with the media, especially when it openly promotes views that we know are wrong and deceptive (see *Ps. 101:1–8, Prov. 4:23, Phil. 4:8*)?
- ② How can we help others to overcome Satan’s end-time deceptions without being exposed to the deceiving influence of those very same deceptions ourselves?
- ③ Many Christians have seen the story of having “Samuel” summoned from the grave as biblical proof that the dead live on. What does this account teach us about why we cannot rely only on a single text or story to build a doctrine, but, instead, we must look at all that the Bible says about a topic?

A Daring Witness

By RICK McEDWARD

At the beginning of the semester, a university classmate asked Sandra if he could take a picture of her class notes with his cell phone. “I saw that you are writing in English,” he said. “I want to improve my English.”

Classes were not taught in English at the university in the Middle East. But English was Sandra’s native language, and she found it easier to take notes in English. “Here you are,” Sandra said, extending her notebook.

The next day, the classmate again asked for permission to take pictures. After the classmate asked to take pictures for several days in a row, Sandra decided to be more intentional with her notes. She resolved to write favorite Bible verses at the bottom of the pages of her notebook.

The next time the classmate asked to take a picture, however, Sandra felt a jolt of fear. She worried that he would notice the verses and stop asking to see her notes. She prayed that God would use the Bible verses for His glory.

The classmate did not seem to notice the Bible verses at first. But after a couple of days, he realized that the notes contained information that the teacher had not mentioned during the class lectures. He went to Sandra and pointed to a verse at the bottom of a page. “Is this a verse from the Bible?” he asked.

“Yes,” Sandra said, her mind racing as she wondered how to explain it.

The classmate paused. “Is this the way you motivate yourself?” he asked.

Sandra smiled with relief. “Exactly,” she said. “I write my favorite verses in my notebook. They are always really helpful and useful for my life.”

After that day, the classmate asked Sandra many questions about her religion and beliefs. As they studied together at the university, he also learned about the beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. At the end of the semester, he asked to make a copy of Sandra’s entire verse-filled notebook. He wanted to share the notes with his siblings.

Although Sandra has not studied with him again, the two have kept in touch, and he regularly asks for advice about life. Sandra is praying for him, his siblings, and the rest of his family. She thanks God for giving her the daring idea to write Bible verses at the bottom of the pages of her notebook.



This mission story illustrates the following components of the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s “I Will Go” strategic plan: Mission Objective No. 1, “To revive the concept of worldwide mission and sacrifice for mission as a way of life”; and Mission Objective No. 2, “To strengthen and diversify Adventist outreach in large cities, across the 10/40 Window, among unreached and under-reached people groups, and to non-Christian religions.” Read more: IWillGo2020.org. Sandra is a pseudonym.

Key Text: *Ephesians 6:11*

Part I: Overview

Our world increasingly has accepted manifestations of the supernatural. We may all know someone who has mentioned communing with a dead relative, participating in a séance (calling up the dead), or playing with a Ouija (pronounced wee-je)/spirit board, even as a kid. In certain clothing stores in the United States of America, one can find books with mystical themes or tarot cards (playing cards that are used to gain insight into someone's past, present, or future), which are seemingly as prevalent as books on any other topic. When these are combined with popular media, which portrays "souls" or communication with the dead in shows and movies on a regular basis, it is not surprising that such manifestations of spiritism have become "normal."

Mysticism, accounts of near-death experiences (NDEs), belief in reincarnation, necromancy, ancestor worship, and spiritism all contribute to the normalization of such things in our society and to the confusion about the afterlife. But God takes anything that has to do with spiritism very seriously, and the Bible warns us in extremely strong language against such practices because they are a deception of Satan. The book of Revelation adds to the admonitions found earlier that at the end of time, Satan's deceptive work will only grow (*see especially Rev. 9:5, 6, 10, 11, 19; Rev. 12:9; Rev. 16:13, 14*). Therefore, having weapons against such deception is extremely important. We must be grounded in the Word of God and filled with the Holy Spirit in order to hold on to the truth and not fall for Satan's schemes.

Part II: Commentary

In this lesson, we will focus on what we can do to fortify ourselves against the schemes of the devil. Moreover, we will delve deeper into Ephesians 6 and Paul's emphasis on the armor of God.

The Armor of God (*Eph. 6:10–18*)

Paul uses several metaphors for the church in the book of Ephesians. First, he calls the church the temple of God (*Eph. 2:19–22*); the church is a building that is a dwelling place of God in the Person of the Holy Spirit. Second, the church is the body of Christ (*Eph. 4:1–16*), wherein we are to work together, with everyone doing his or her part in order that we might grow in Christ. Third, the church is the bride of Christ (*Eph. 5:25–27*)

with Christ as the Bridegroom preparing her for Himself (He is the one who works in each one of us, transforming and converting). Paul's final metaphor is of the church as an army (*Eph. 6:10–17*). This army is well prepared for battle.

Paul starts out by encouraging the believers to “be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power” (*Eph. 6:10, NIV*). The first word for “strong” is *endunamoo*, which has the basic meaning of “being able” to do something, or to have the power to do something. Thus, Paul exhorts the believers to believe that they have the power they need to do what needs to be done in the spiritual battle waged in our world. They have this power because of Christ's “mighty power.”

After this exhortation, Paul tells the believers to put on the armor of God (*Eph. 6:11*). Paul uses the style of Old Testament battle speeches (*Deut. 20:2–4, 2 Chron. 20:13–19, 2 Chron. 32:6–8*) in order to inspire and motivate believers to trust in what God can do. But Paul specifies that the purpose of the full armor is to “stand against the devil's schemes” (*Eph. 6:11, NIV*). The word for schemes is *methodeia*, which means “craftiness.” It is used only once more in the New Testament, in Ephesians: “Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming [*methodeia*]” (*Eph. 4:14, NIV*). In this passage, Paul contrasts our being built up as a church into unity in faith and knowledge of God with our being like little children who are pulled away by anything that sounds good but in reality comes from Satan. The apostle Paul also admonishes believers to be vigilant, “in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes” (*2 Cor. 2:11, NIV*).

The devil's deception is real and dangerous and present in all ages. However, the book of Revelation tells us that the serpent is enraged and filled with fury because “he knows that his time is short” (*Rev. 12:12, NIV*). Therefore, it stands to reason that the closer we come toward the end, the more furious, frantic, and busier Satan gets. Paul uses the word “stand” often in his books (*Rom. 14:4; 1 Cor. 16:13; Phil. 1:27; Phil. 4:1; 1 Thess. 3:7, 8*) and calls believers to stand firm and to stand fast. In this passage, Paul uses the word “stand” four times (*Eph. 6:11, 13, 14*). He repeats it again and again in order to emphasize that they are to stand in Christ. In order for them to stand firm against the devil's schemes, they must put on the armor of God.

Interestingly, Paul doesn't say believers must fight against the devil, but stand firm. Why? Because God is the One who fights. In fact, God already has won the victory on the cross and through the resurrection; therefore, the final victory at His return is assured. We need only to stand with determination and hold on to God and His Word.

Paul continues, stating that we do not struggle against flesh and blood

but against the powers of darkness (*Eph. 6:12*). The word “struggle” comes from the word *pale*, which means “wrestling” or “conflict.” Interestingly, this word occurs only one time in the New Testament, right here. We may be deceived into thinking that our battle is with humans, but in fact it is with satanic powers. The cosmic conflict is against all the satanic forces, which are described in different terms, possibly in order to demonstrate how large the threat is.

Because we don’t see the invisible world, we can easily be lulled into forgetting that the enemy, and his opposition to God, even exists. But Paul is not naive about the battle between good and evil. He encountered it many times throughout his own ministry; Satan tried to destroy him for years. Thus, Paul was shipwrecked, beaten, stoned, and chased out of towns, and much of that happened multiple times. Paul points out that it was not just humans who were against him; there was a power behind the opposition. And yet, God kept giving him the strength to keep going, and, thus, his desire to preach the Word was not diminished.

Putting on the armor is a metaphor for holding on to different aspects of God’s Word and for trust in God. The metaphor is built on the imagery of the Roman soldier’s armor. The belt of truth (*Eph. 6:14, NIV*) fastened around our waist reminds us of how imperative it is to grab on to the truth and not let go “that we may work together for the truth” (*3 John 8, NIV*). The breastplate of righteousness (*Eph. 6:14, NKJV*) should cause us to think of what Christ has done for us as we are covered by His righteousness because we cannot manufacture our own. Christ is the One who transforms us by His presence. For our shoes, we need the readiness of the gospel of peace (*Eph. 6:15, NIV*). This instance is the only place in the Bible where the gospel is called the gospel of peace. The gospel, the good news about Jesus, brings peace to those who accept Jesus into their lives. Paul not only tells us to accept the gospel ourselves but also to take it wherever we go and offer its hope to others. The shield of faith (*Eph. 6:16*) serves to extinguish the arrows of the evil one.

The devil knows what to aim at in each of our characters to cause us to stumble and fall: unkind words for some, alcohol or sex for another. But our taking up the shield means saying no to doubt, sin, and temptation because we trust that God has the power we need. He promised that when we are weak, He is strong (*2 Cor. 12:10*). The helmet of salvation (*Eph. 6:17*) reminds us of the hope of eternal life because of Christ’s sacrifice and resurrection. The assurance of salvation keeps our minds at peace. Last, the sword of the Spirit (*Eph. 6:17*), which is the Word of God, demonstrates our need of Scripture to be the weapon we use against the schemes of the devil. That is why memorizing Bible verses is crucial. If we hold the shield of faith in one hand and the Word of God (the sword) in the other, then we do not have a free hand with which to pick

up revenge, malice, a curt reply, immorality, unethical behavior, temptation, lust, hatred, or deceit. If only we used faith and the Word as our weapons, we would not fall into discouragement and despondency so often.

Paul closes this passage by telling us to pray at all times and pray in the Spirit (*Eph. 6:18*). If we aren't going to fall for the schemes of Satan, then we need to pray. We need to pray for the Holy Spirit; we need to pray for the power to stand; we need to pray for strength against temptation; we need to pray for wisdom to make decisions with God; we need to pray for love for people; we need to pray for greater faith; we need to pray for boldness to speak about Christ. Satan wants to scare us or lure us away from God with promises of fun, excitement, and freedom, but God wants to equip us to stand in Christ because true freedom and happiness come only from God.

Part III: Life Application

- 1. What in your life do you need power to stand for or against? Do you need to speak up for someone or something, or be bolder about preaching Christ? Pray the armor of God over yourself by naming each element and asking God to cover you with it. Try praying it every day for a month to see what difference it makes in your life.**

- 2. Think of someone you know who is personally struggling against the schemes of Satan. Now take the time to pray the armor of God over him or her. Once again, take every element and pray that God puts it on this person so that his or her mind and heart will be changed and protected from the devil's attacks.**
