

Interpreting (Explaining) the Writings of the Prophets (Special Messengers)



SABBATH—MARCH 7

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Isaiah 65:17; Mark 1:15; Romans 2:14–16; Ephesians 2:8, 9; James 2:14–26; 1 John 5:12, 13.

MEMORY VERSE: “Jesus explained to them what was said about himself in all the Scriptures [verses]. He began with Moses and all the Prophets” (Luke 24:27, NIV).

AS SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISTS WE BELIEVE that Ellen G. White had the gift of prophecy. But the next question is, How do we interpret (explain) her writings?

We believe that Ellen G. White's inspiration,¹ *not her authority*,² is on the same level as the Old and New Testament prophets. But when we interpret what she has written, we must use the same principles (rules) of interpretation (explanation) for her writings that we do for the Bible. The principles for interpreting the Bible can be used when interpreting Ellen G. White's writings. But the authority of the Bible is above the authority of the Spirit of Prophecy. To use an example from American law: A person might use the same laws for making a decision (ruling) of the United States Supreme Court as for making a decision by a lower court. But in the end, the decision of the Supreme Court carries the greatest authority.

THIS WEEK'S LESSON UP CLOSE: What is the difference between an analytical (careful) study and the preaching of verses from the Bible? Why is careful Bible study so important? Can people who have never heard the gospel³ be saved? How is the kingdom of grace⁴ different from the kingdom of glory?⁵

1. inspiration—the act of the Holy Spirit giving someone a certain thought or feeling.

2. authority—the influence or power that creates respect and trust.

3. gospel—the good news that Jesus saves us from our sins.

4. grace—God's free gift of mercy.

5. glory—great beauty, power, and royal perfection.

SUNDAY—MARCH 8**EXEGESIS⁶ (Romans 2:14–16)**

Exegesis is a careful study of the original meaning of a verse. It focuses on what the author wanted to say and what the verse meant to the original reader.

What is the original or exegetical⁷ meaning of Romans 2:14–16? Compare⁸ Ezekiel 3:17–19 and Romans 10:12–17.

Of course, there will be people in heaven who never have heard the gospel. In some events God reaches out to people in heathen lands and saves them. But they are saved because the Holy Spirit has touched their hearts. And they have answered properly with their works. They are not saved simply because they have lived up to what their hearts tell them is right. If they were, then they would be saved by keeping the law. And the New Testament clearly does not permit (allow) this (Romans 3:28; Galatians 2:16). The issue in Romans 2:11–16 is the responsibility of Jews and Gentiles, not their salvation. The fact that God is no respecter of persons (verse 11, KJV) is made clear by what Paul says in Romans 2:12. “Some people do not know God’s law when they sin. They will not be judged by the law when they die. Others do know God’s law when they sin. They will be judged by the law” (NirV). Those “without law” are the Gentiles (non-

Jews) who do not have the written law given to the Israelites on Mount Sinai. But they will be destroyed, not because they did not have the written law, but because they are sinners who have sinned against the law “*written in their hearts, their conscience*” (verse 15, KJV).

In the judgment, Jews and Gentiles will be judged and punished by their laws. The Jews will be judged by the written law and the Gentiles judged by their law “*written in their hearts.*” Among the Gentiles, the conscience did the same work as the written law did among the Jews. The Bible clearly says that “‘No one is right with God, no one at all’ ” (Romans 3:10, NirV). This means that Jews and Gentiles are sinners alike and are all saved the same way. It is not by any law keeping but only by Jesus’ death on the cross.



We will all be judged by the law “written in [our] hearts” (Romans 2:15, KJV).

How dependable is your conscience as a guide? Does following

6. exegesis—a very careful study of the historical background and original meaning of verses in the Bible.

7. exegetical—carefully explaining the meaning of Bible verses.

8. compare—to show how two or more things are the same.

your conscience (heart) always make sure that you will make a right decision (choice)? Defend your answer.

MONDAY—MARCH 9

HOMILETICS (Mark 1:15)

Homiletics is the art of preaching. Sometimes a preacher may use just the wording of a verse, without studying its original meaning, to make a point during a sermon. This is called the homiletical⁹ use of the Bible.

In Mark 1:15, Jesus preaches that a certain kingdom is near. Which kingdom is that?

The kingdom that Jesus was proclaiming at that time was the kingdom of grace, which He established during His first coming. But the verse also can be used for our situation today. A preacher on Sabbath morning may tell the church group, “All the time prophecies¹⁰ have been fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand.” And he may encourage them today to turn away from sin and believe the gospel. The kingdom that the modern preacher has in mind, however, is no longer the kingdom of grace but the kingdom of glory that Christ will begin during His second coming. The first interpretation (explanation) of Mark 1:15 is exegetical. But the second one is homiletical.

According to Mark 1:17, Jesus was walking by the Sea of Galilee one day when He saw Simon and Andrew, his

brother. They were throwing a net into the sea (they were fishermen). Jesus said to them, “ ‘Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men’ ” (NKJV). And quickly they left their nets and followed Him.

A modern preacher, using the words of Mark 1:17, may encourage church members to follow Jesus because only He can make us fishers of men. Exegetically the verse means Simon and Andrew. But homiletically it can be used for every Christian because Jesus wants us all to become fishers of men (Matthew 28:19, 20).



Jesus wants us all to become fishers of men.

Ellen G. White often used the Bible homiletically. She used a lot of the language of the Bible. Whenever she spoke or wrote on a topic, she used Bible language and Bible verses to give the church the message that she had received from the Lord. For example, in the book *Education*, Ellen G. White has

9. homiletical—of or concerning the art of preaching.

10. prophecies—messages from God that tell what will happen in the future.

a chapter on the study of physiology.¹¹ Speaking of good posture,¹² she says, “Among the first things a person should try to have is a correct position, both in sitting and in standing. God made man upright. God desires him to have the physical as well as the mental and moral benefit of being made upright. He wishes for us to have the grace, honor, courage, and self-confidence of an erect [straight] posture.”—Adapted from *Education*, page 198. That “ ‘God made man upright’ ” is a quote from Ecclesiastes 7:29, NKJV. But when Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes, he was talking about moral (rightness) straightness, not about posture. Clearly, this shows that Ellen G. White’s use of the verse is homiletical, for the purpose of teaching a lesson.



God made us upright. We should have good posture while sitting and standing.

11. physiology—the study of the human body and how its parts work.

12. posture—the position of the body as in a sitting or standing position; how a person carries himself or herself or how he or she holds his or her body while sitting or standing.

13. vision—a special message from God that is seen in the mind or in a dream or in a trance to help a person know God’s will (plan).

TUESDAY—MARCH 10

TIME AND PLACE (Jeremiah 4:23–26)

An important principle of Bible interpretation is the principle of studying the times and situations during which a chosen verse was written and by whom.



Jeremiah describes how the land of Judah would be destroyed because of the people’s disobedience.

What is Jeremiah describing in Jeremiah 4:23–26?

Through Jeremiah, God pleaded with His people to turn from their evil ways, but they would not listen. In verses 23–26, the prophet in vision¹³ sees what will happen if they disobey. In poetic language, Jeremiah describes how the land of Judah will be destroyed and laid to waste because of their disobedience. When we interpret a verse, we need to consider when it was written and what the situation was at that time.

What happened with Judah and

Jerusalem in 586 B.C. is an example of what will happen to the world in the future. When Jesus comes and the earth is cleansed (made pure) with fire, Jeremiah 4:23–26 will be a perfect description of this earth during the millennium. Exegetically, Jeremiah 4:23–26 points to the destruction of Jerusalem. But as a symbol,¹⁴ it also points to the time of the millennium. Ellen G. White quotes from Jeremiah 4 to describe the situation on earth during the millennium. Read *The Great Controversy*, page 659.

In reading Ellen G. White, we also need to remember time and situations. For example, in 1897 Mrs. White wrote that “the money spent on bicycles and dress and other needless things must be carefully spent.”—Adapted from *Testimonies¹⁵ to Ministers [Workers for God; Pastors]*, page 398.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the bicycle was not a cheap method of transportation. Instead, it was a rich person’s toy. The best early bicycle cost \$150, an investment almost the same as buying an expensive car today. People were mortgaging¹⁶ their income for months in advance to buy what was then an expensive toy. Within a few years’ time the bicycle became a useful and cheap method of transportation. And Ellen G. White never again spoke against it.

Ellen G. White’s policy¹⁷ on bicycles was based on the Bible principle of

good stewardship.¹⁸ If she were alive today, she probably would use this principle for people not to spend money on foolish things.

Time and situation are important in the interpretation of inspired writings. But they are important, too, in all parts of life. How quick are you to judge the actions of others without getting more background information? How can you improve in this area?

WEDNESDAY—MARCH 11

IMMEDIATE CONTEXT¹⁹ (Isaiah 65:17)

What does Isaiah mean in Isaiah 65:17 when he speaks of the new heavens and new earth? Is it the new earth Christians expect in the future?

In the immediate context, Isaiah says, “ ‘Babies in Jerusalem will no longer live only a few days. Old people will not fail to live for a very long time. Those who live to the age of 100 will be thought of as still being young when they die. Those who die before they are 100 will be considered as having been under God’s curse’ ” (verse 20, NIV). Death on the new earth? This cannot be the new earth we expect to follow the millennium. What then is the new heavens

14. symbol—word-pictures.

15. *Testimonies*—the writings of Ellen G. White.

16. mortgaging—borrowing money against home equity (value of one’s home).

17. policy—rules or standards by which we live or conduct ourselves.

18. stewardship—management of God’s property.

19. immediate context—meaning that points to the original situation of the writer’s time.

and the new earth in verse 17?

In these verses Isaiah describes a “new creation” that would have happened if Israel had remained faithful to God. So, the prophecy, which was conditional,²⁰ was not fulfilled. This “new heavens and new earth” never became real. But, in a secondary sense, these verses point forward to the new heavens and the new earth that will happen at the close of the millennium. But in that “new heavens and new earth,” there will be no children born to saved people (Matthew 22:30). Also there will be no more sorrow or death (Revelation 21:4), so we have to be careful how far we try to push the interpretation of Bible prophecy.

In *Christ’s Object Lessons*, Ellen G. White writes that “those who accept the Saviour, however sincere their conversion,²¹ should never be taught to say or to feel that they are saved.”—Page 155, adapted. Does this mean we can never be sure about our salvation? Read 1 John 5:12, 13.

When we study the meaning of the Bible, we discover that Ellen G. White is speaking about whether a person can fall from grace after they are born again in Jesus. Many Christians in Ellen G. White’s time believed in the doctrine (belief) of “once saved, always saved.” Ellen G. White was clearly against this teaching. She says, “We can never safely put confidence in self or feel,

this side of heaven, that we are safe against temptation.”—*Christ’s Object Lessons*, page 155.

The immediate context makes it clear that she is discussing the issue of self-confidence and temptations²² after conversion. We are never safe against temptations. We can never say that we cannot fall. We must never say that we are saved and safe from temptation. But this does not mean that in Jesus we cannot have day-by-day assurance (promise) of salvation.

Your hope of salvation rests in what Jesus did for you. If so, how can you then not have assurance of salvation? On the other hand, if you are looking to self, how can you ever have any assurance at all?

THURSDAY—MARCH 12

THE LARGER CONTEXT²³ (Ephesians 2:8, 9)

According to Ephesians 2:8, 9 and James 2:14–26, are we saved by grace through faith alone, or do we also need works? Does Paul disagree with James on the issue of salvation? What do Romans 3:21–28; Romans 4:3; and Galatians 3:6–12 say about this topic?

When we study the larger context in the Bible, then we must study what other

20. conditional (prophecy)—prophecy (warning; message) that depends on whether or not people obey God in order for it to be fulfilled.

21. conversion—becoming a true disciple (follower) of God.

22. temptations—things that can turn us away from God and that try to get us to do, think, feel, or say what is wrong.

23. larger context—the method (way) of going beyond the original meaning of the writer in search of a broader interpretation (explanation) of the meaning of the verse.

passages have to say on the topic. In this case, we discover that James is not arguing for good works as a requirement for salvation. Rather, James argues that there are two kinds of faith, one good and the other not good. Paul speaks about the good faith that is followed by good deeds (actions). James speaks of the faith that stops short of full obedience to God.

Paul uses the example of Abraham to show that we are made righteous (holy) on real faith. James shows that Abraham's faith was real because it showed good works (obedience). So, we do not need anything but faith, real faith, to be saved, and our actions will show if our faith is real, or not.

When reading Ellen G. White, we also need to consider the larger context in her writings. For example, on the issue of meat eating she has very strong statements but also many differing statements that need to be considered as well.

In the book *Counsels on Diet and Foods*, for example, Ellen G. White says, "Vegetables, fruits, and grains should be included in our diet. Not an ounce of flesh meat should enter our stomachs. The eating of flesh [meat] is not natural. We are to return to God's original purpose in the creation of man."—Page 380, adapted. Anyone reading only this statement would think that we should not eat meat at all. But, a few pages further on is this statement: "A meat diet is not the most healthy of diets. But, I would not take the position that meat should be removed by every-

one. Those who have feeble digestive organs can often use meat, when they cannot eat vegetables, fruit, or porridge."—Pages 394, 395, adapted. (Read also Friday's study.) We must study all that Ellen G. White has written on a given topic. Then a balanced picture comes forth that is very important for every Christian who takes religion seriously.

We should not make *meat and drink* our religion. But God has given us wonderful advice on diet that can have a positive influence²⁴ on our health. How careful are you in your diet and all your habits? Why wait until sickness strikes before you make a change for the better?

FRIDAY—MARCH 13

ADDITIONAL STUDY: Read Ellen G. White, "Christ Our Righteousness,"²⁵ pages 35–39; "Ellen White Clearly Draws the Lines," pages 41–46; "Faith and Works," pages 47–50, in *Faith and Works*.

Further Guidelines for the Interpretation of Inspired²⁶ Writings:

We have studied the guidelines in this week's lesson. But in addition we need to (1) ask for the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the study of His Word; (2) ensure that we use one or more good translations; (3) look for principles that are widely used for all people, in all

24. influence—the power to affect or change persons or things.

25. righteousness—God's character that is given to us; holiness.

26. inspired—given and influenced (guided) by the Holy Spirit.

places, and at all times; (4) be willing to obey the truths we discover; (5) be open-minded and willing to surrender (let go of) positions that are wrong; (6) guard against bad interpretations; (7) work together with people of experience; and (8) use common sense.

Ellen G. White on *Once Saved, Always Saved*:

“There is nothing so insulting to God or so dangerous to the human soul as pride and depending on self rather than on God. Of all sins it is the most hopeless and the most incurable. Peter’s fall was not quick, but done in steps. Self-confidence led Peter to believe that he was saved. And he took step after step along the downward path, until he could deny his Master [Jesus]. We can never safely put confidence in self or feel that we are safe against temptation. Those who accept the Saviour should never be taught to say or to feel that they are saved. This is misleading. Everyone should be taught to hold on to hope and faith. But even when we give ourselves to Christ and know that He accepts us, we are not safe from temptation.”

—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, pages 154, 155.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ❶ Study the whole context of the Ellen G. White quote from *Christ’s Object Lessons*. Now study the one statement about not saying we are saved. How easy to twist that one statement and come away with a whole different meaning. Why must we always be careful not to twist statements? What other examples can you find of people having done just that? Why is it such a temptation?
- ❷ What are some other ways that Ellen G. White’s writings have been misused? What can we do to avoid the trap of throwing the whole thing out, simply because it has not been used properly?
- ❸ Think about what we have been given with the health message as it appears in the writings of Ellen White. What great blessings can we take away from it if we use it properly? What traps must we avoid?