

Heaven's Means of Communication



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gen. 18:1–15, 32:30, Exod. 4:10–17, Ps. 19:1–6, John 1:14, 3:16, Col. 2:9.*

Memory Text: “God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds” (*Hebrews 1:1, 2, NKJV*).

There are two basic ways in which God has revealed Himself to humanity: general and special revelation. General revelation is God's revelation of Himself to all people through nature and conscience (*see Ps. 19:1, Rom. 1:20*). God's revelations through the prophets as recorded in Scripture, especially His revelation through Jesus Christ, is special revelation. Through this means, God appeared to the Old Testament patriarchs and prophets in order to make His will known. He revealed His power and purpose through Israel's history. Then later, He sent His Son, who, in the garb of humanity, revealed the Father in a unique and powerful way.

This week we'll look at both types of revelation.

The Week at a Glance: What is general and special revelation? What can nature teach us about God? What can it not teach us? How does the revelation through Jesus Christ differ from God's other revelations?

*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 3.

In the Beginning

In the Garden of Eden God spoke with Adam and Eve face-to-face. “And they heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day” (*Gen. 3:8*). However, after that fateful day, when they blatantly disobeyed their Lord, they no longer were allowed to enjoy His presence (*Gen. 3:23, 24*), and their face-to-face communion with Him ended.

What do the following texts tell us about face-to-face encounters with God? *Gen. 18:1–15; 32:30; Exod. 33:11; Judg. 6:22; 13:2, 3.*

Frequently the Old Testament identifies the Angel of God or the Angel of the Lord as God Himself. Jacob refers to God and the Angel in the same way (*Gen. 48:15, 16*); the Angel of the Lord appears to Moses in the burning bush; yet, it is God who speaks to him (*Exod. 3:2–6*); the Angel who appeared to Gideon is identified with God (*Judg. 6:11–14*); and the same is true of the Angel of the Lord who appeared to Manoah and his wife (*Judg. 13:11–22*). Whenever God manifested Himself to human beings in a bodily form, it was always in a humanlike manifestation.

In John 1:18 John says, “No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.” The Divine Being, therefore, who appeared to the people in the Old Testament must have been Jesus, not the Father. Ellen G. White tells us that “after the transgression of Adam, the Lord spoke no longer directly with man; the human race was given into the hands of Christ, and all communication came through Him to the world. It was Christ who spoke the law on Mount Sinai.”—*Fundamentals of Christian Education*, pp. 237, 238.

What has been your own experience regarding what sin and rebellion do between you and God? That is, when you do something that you know is wrong, that you know is sinful, how does that impact your relationship with God? In what ways do you feel a separation from Him? How does guilt drive you away from Him, away from the desire to pray and commune with the Lord? How does this experience help you better understand what happened in Eden?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Psalm 19:1–6*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: That God reveals Himself through general revelation (creation, our conscience) and special revelation (prophets, the Bible, the Incarnation).

Feel: A sense of gratitude and responsibility for God's self disclosure.

Do: Seek to know God and His will by studying His various means of revelation.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. The Need for Revelation (*Ps. 19:1–6*)

A In what ways has God revealed Himself in creation? What would it have been like to commune with God in Eden?

B How has sin limited God's revelation to us through creation? Our conscience? The Bible and other prophets? His son Jesus?

II. Revelation and the Prophets (*Exod. 4:10–17, Isa. 6:5–8*)

A Why did Moses and Isaiah feel inadequate to the task of speaking for God? Why does God choose imperfect people to speak for Him?

B How do you feel about the possibility that God may have something to say to or through you? Or that like Aaron, you may be called to reiterate the truth about God?

III. Revelation and Jesus (*Col. 1:15, 2:9*)

A What is the significance of Jesus' role in revealing God? How can knowing more about Jesus lead to a deeper understanding of God?

B What can you do this week to focus more on Jesus as God's supreme revelation to you?

► **Summary:** Scripture records God's unceasing effort to reveal Himself to a race separated from Him by sin. Through Jesus, God not only saves us from that sin but reveals Himself, thus enabling us to have a relationship with Him.

In Nature

What can nature reveal about God? *Ps. 19:1–6, 33:6–9, Rom. 1:19–23.*

The Bible tells us that the world that God created was perfect in every way (*Gen. 1:31*). But Scripture also reveals that sin has altered the natural world (*Gen. 3:17, 18*). Prior to the Fall, only beautiful or useful plants were found upon the earth. God “never made a thorn, a thistle, or a tare. These are Satan’s work, the result of degeneration.” —Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 6, p. 186. Nevertheless, there is still great beauty in the changing of the leaves in autumn, in a vivid sunset, and in the opening of a rosebud on a sunny morning.

Bible writers often refer to the phenomena of nature as a revelation of God’s majesty and greatness (*Psalms 8 and 104*). Consider the universe! On a clear night one can see with the unaided eye thousands of stars. However, our Milky Way galaxy has about two hundred billion stars—and that’s only one galaxy among several hundred billion galaxies that we now can see. Who knows how many more are beyond our telescopes!

Distances in the universe boggle the mind: Apart from the sun, the nearest star to our earth, Alpha Centauri, is 4.37 light-years away (one light-year is the distance light travels in one year—5.9 trillion miles). A spaceship traveling 100,000 miles per hour would require about 29,000 years to get there. In contrast, our Milky Way has a diameter of *100,000 light-years!* The largest galaxy known thus far is Markarian, with a diameter of 1.3 million light-years.

Similar awe-inspiring facts would come to light if we used an electron microscope to study the tens of thousands of genes each individual possesses. Our finite minds are simply unable to comprehend all the wonders of the created world.

Yet, nature alone isn’t enough to reveal the fullness of God’s character (*Rom. 1:23*). Many of the fundamental questions about God cannot be answered through a study of nature. We will find it hard to see God’s love reflected in how cats and killer whales play with their prey before killing them. And while we can see God’s power and majesty in creation, nature does not tell us always that God is “merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth” (*Exod. 34:6, NKJV*).

What aspects of nature truly talk to you about the love and power of God? At the same time, what things do you find disturbing; and why? What do your answers tell you about how limited nature is in revealing the fullness of God’s love and character?

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: **Nature, the Bible, and Jesus are God’s chosen means for revealing Himself to us.**

How would the sun sound if you could hear it sing?

The psalmist describes the sun as “rejoicing,” with each day “uttering speech,” and the heavens “declaring” the glory of God (*Ps. 19:1–3*). Obviously the sun does not have vocal cords. But scientists who study the sun may have reason to believe that the psalmist’s description of the sun may be a bit more literal than previously expected.

The sun is filled with sound. By measuring the vibrations on the sun’s surface, astronomers at Stanford University have recorded the pressure of acoustical waves in the sun. Because the solar sound waves are too low for the human ear to hear, scientists speed up the waves and compress the vibrations into solar music that sounds like humming. But that’s not all. Not only does the sun sing, it can do so in a vast range of notes. A piano has 88 keys; the sun has 10 million. That’s one colossal keyboard. —www.noao.edu/education/ighelio.

Now, the words “the heavens declare the glory of God” and “the sun . . . rejoiceth” take on a whole new meaning, quite literally singing to us of the warmth and vast range of His sustaining love.

Consider This: How else does the sun teach us about the majesty of God? What does the sun suggest about God’s ability to reach us, though He, too, is *physically* distant? What are the limits of the analogy?

► **STEP 2—Explore**

Bible Commentary

I. God Communicates Through Nature (*Read Psalm 19:1–6 and Romans 1:19–23 with your class.*)

Nature’s arrangement and beauty powerfully argue for God’s existence. Paul says that God uses the visible things of nature to reveal the invisible things, such as His Godhead and His eternal power. The mind may comprehend

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Through Prophets

After the Fall, when God no longer spoke to humanity directly, He communicated with them through men and women whom the Bible calls seers or prophets (1 Sam. 9:9). What do the following texts tell us about these prophets? 2 Sam. 23:2; Jer. 1:5; Hos. 4:1; Amos 7:14, 15; John 1:1–3.

The word *prophet* (in Hebrew *nabi'*) means “one called [by God]” or “one who has a vocation [from God].” The prophet is a person who proclaims divine messages. These may relate to the past, the present, or the future and may consist of exhortation, instruction, consolation, or prediction.

The English word *prophet* comes from the Greek *prophetes*, a combination of the preposition *pro*, “for” or “on behalf of,” with the verb *phemi*, “to speak.” Thus the idea being “to speak for.”

Read Exodus 4:10–17. How does this help us better understand the role of a prophet?

Here Moses objects to God’s call for him to go to Egypt and confront Pharaoh, claiming that he is “slow of speech and of a slow tongue” (*vs. 10*). Even after God reminded Moses that He had made man’s mouth and would enable him to speak before Pharaoh, Moses still objected. Then God told Moses that He would send Aaron to go with him. “He shall be your spokesman to the people. And he himself shall be as a mouth for you, and you shall be to him as God” (*vs. 16, NKJV*). As Moses was to be the spokesperson for God, so Aaron would be the spokesperson for Moses. Thus, a prophet speaks for someone. The prophet may speak to humankind on behalf of God or vice versa. The primary task of a biblical prophet was not to predict the future but to declare the divine will. Throughout the history of Israel, the prophet’s main task was to guide God’s people. Particularly during the time of the monarchy, when the kings often “did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord” (2 Kings 13:2), the prophetic institution was the guardian of the theocracy. The prophets upheld the law of God and taught it to the people.

Notice the humility of Moses and the sense of his own weakness. Why is that a good attitude for anyone, not just a prophet, to have? What dangers do we face if we get a sense of our own self-sufficiency?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

these invisible truths through the help of the created works. Despite being warped by sin, the natural world still witnesses to us God’s power and His love. God’s revelation of Himself through His created works is enough to reveal to us what He requires of us, leaving us without any excuse for neglecting duty.

Paul also says in Romans 1:20–23 that humanity is not content with God’s revelation of Himself in nature. Such minds take what God appoints to reveal Himself and see these things as representing God Himself. So, instead of the ibis and the stars declaring God’s love, they became gods to the darkened mind of the ancient Egyptian. Science is guilty of this today. Strip God completely from the act of Creation, and you are left with evolution.

Consider This: Even though nature is exquisitely beautiful and ordered and declares God’s glory, why is it unable to communicate a complete image of God, or the purpose He has for humankind?

II. God Communicates Through the Prophets *(Read Exodus 19:7 with your class.)*

A prophet’s main job was to reveal God’s will to the people. One doesn’t wake up one day and decide to become a prophet. It’s a calling from the Lord, as in the case of Moses. Ironically, Moses’ reluctance to speak before Pharaoh reveals a very telling detail about the work of a prophet. The specific work that Moses feared to do is at the heart of a prophet’s work: serving as a divine spokesperson, a voice that articulates Heaven’s will on earth.

Consider This: What do the following texts teach us about the work and the tasks of a prophet? *Exod. 19:7, Num. 12:6, 1 Sam. 3:10, Dan. 4:23, Amos 7:15, Acts 18:9, 22:18, Rev. 10:4.*

III. God Communicates Through the Spoken and Written Word *(Read John 20:30, 31; 2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:21.)*

Paul reminds us that “all scripture” is inspired by God. This does not allow for us to decide which part of Scripture is inspired by God and which is human invention.

But what does it mean to be inspired or “God-breathed”? The word

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Through the Word

Basic to the claims of Christianity is that it is a revealed religion, the record of which we find in Scripture. During the first few millennia of humankind's existence, God revealed Himself to individuals through dreams, visions, or epiphanies (appearances). From the time of Moses (fifteenth century B.C.) and onward, many of these revelations were written down. As a result, we have today 66 books in the Bible, containing all the knowledge necessary for salvation.

What do the following texts tell us about the Bible itself?

Matt. 1:22; 2:15, 17; 4:14

John 20:30, 31

2 Tim. 3:16

There are a number of important characteristics of the Bible that should hold our attention. (1) Its unity: The Bible at first sight appears to be merely a collection of ancient literature. However, considering that it was written by approximately forty authors over a period of nearly sixteen hundred years, its unity is amazing. The plan of salvation is revealed progressively from Genesis to Revelation. There is unity in its theme: The Messiah is promised throughout the Old Testament and declared in every New Testament book to have come in the person of Jesus Christ. And there is complete harmony of teaching: The doctrines of the Old and New Testament are the same. (2) The history it portrays: The Old Testament embodies the oldest history of any people in the world. William F. Albright, the greatest archaeologist of the twentieth century, wrote, "Hebrew national tradition excels all other in its clear picture of tribal and family origins. In Egypt and Babylonia, in Assyria and Phoenicia, in Greece and Rome, we look in vain for anything comparable. There is nothing like it in the tradition of the Germanic peoples. Neither India nor China can produce anything similar."—*The Biblical Period From Abraham to Ezra* (New York: Harper, Torch Book, 1963), p. 27. (3) Its survival: The Bible, compared with other ancient writings, has more manuscript evidence than any other piece of classical literature—in spite of early attempts by Roman emperors to destroy it. For example, there are more than five thousand known Greek manuscripts of the New Testament in existence. Homer's *Iliad* is second with only 643 manuscripts that have survived.

The reason for this phenomenon is the Holy Spirit, the real author of God's Word, who inspired all the human authors. He ensured that the biblical historians presented an accurate picture, and He watched over the history and preservation of the Bible.

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

inspired is translated from the Greek *theopneustos*. We can look back to Adam for a clue. Adam, the first man, was “God-breathed,” meaning that God literally breathed life into him. Thus, Adam’s life was God-inspired; it is the reason he became a living soul. The Bible is called the Living Word of God because it has power to teach, convict, correct, and instruct us how to grow into the fullness of God. The Bible is the thought of God communicated to humanity.

Consider This: What can we learn from the following texts about how the Bible was composed? *Exod. 34:27, Ps. 119:105, Heb. 4:12.*

IV. Communication—Examples and Teachings—Through Jesus (*Read aloud John 1:1, 14; Col. 2:9; Heb. 1:1–3.*)

God’s greatest act of mercy was sending Jesus to die for us. Yet all the aspects of Jesus’ life, not just His death, reveal the plan of salvation at work and communicate God’s truth and grace to us: His perfect life is an example of obedience; His vicarious death allows Him to justify us; our faith in His death frees us from the guilt of sin; His resurrection promises us immortality; His ascension into heaven confirms His promise to return to earth and take us to meet the Father.

Consider This: What do the following texts reveal to us about Jesus as the most perfect revelation of God to man? *Matt. 4:17, 23; 10:24; 28:18; Luke 1:77; John 13:15; 1 Cor. 11:1; 1 Thess. 1:10; 5:9.*

► STEP 3—Practice

Thought Questions:

- 1 Why should we not accept the teaching of everyone who eloquently preaches and calls upon the name of God? *See Jer. 14:14, Mark 13:22, 2 Peter 2:1, 1 John 4:1.*
- 2 God communicated directly with humans in the Garden of Eden. He communicated directly with humans when Jesus was on earth. Why, do you think, does God not still communicate with humans face-to-face? *Read Joel 2:28, 29; Amos 3:7.*

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Through Christ

The center and substance of God's revelation is the person of Christ, God in human flesh. When in God's plan the time was right, Jesus was "born of a woman, born under the law" (*Gal. 4:4, NKJV*). He lived for about thirty-three years in Palestine, died on the cross, rose from the tomb, and ascended to His Father.

What do the following texts tell us about how God's revelation through Christ differed from the other revelations discussed this week? *John 1:14; 3:16; 14:8, 9; Col. 2:9; Heb. 1:1, 2.*

The Bible far surpasses the revelation of God in nature; yet, no written record can equal the personal presence of the Son of God. The Bible is God's tool to accomplish His purpose in our lives. However, it has no lasting value if we regard it only as an interesting history book. Unless it leads us to the One it reveals, our study of the Bible will be of little benefit. The Bible was written, above all, to give to us the revelation of God presented to the world through the life and death of His Son, Jesus.

"That was the true Light which gives light to every man who comes into the world" (*John 1:9, NKJV*). **What contribution does this text make to our understanding of the revelation of God in Christ?**

The NIV English translation catches the idea best: "The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world." This does not mean that every person receives this light, only that if a person is illuminated at all, it must be from Jesus (*Acts 4:12*). The true light shines on all humankind in the same sense that Jesus died for everyone, but not everyone will be saved. As John goes on to say, many will not accept this light (*John 1:10-12*).

How well do you know Jesus yourself? If someone were to say to you, "Tell me about Jesus, what He is like and what He can do for me," what would you say and why? Be prepared to share your answer in class on Sabbath.

Learning Cycle CONTINUED**Application Question:**

God is not static; He communicates with us as needed, in ways that will meet our needs. With this dynamic paradigm in mind, what methods of communication could help meet the needs of your congregation?

Witnessing

Almost thirty years ago, Swedish nature photographer Kjell B. Sandved found a perfect letter F on the wing of an orange sphinx moth. What if, he wondered, the letters of the entire alphabet could be found in the wing patterns of butterflies and moths? For the next twenty years, he waded through chest-high waters, peered down into exotic flowers, or looked under leaves, hunting for letters all over the world. Using self-designed microscopic lenses, he photographed the letters A–Z and numbers zero to nine—often finding more than one—without capturing or killing a single insect. Thus, *The Butterfly Alphabet* was born.

Don't expect butterflies, though, to start lining up any time soon to spell out words, much like the spider did in the fanciful children's story *Charlotte's Web*. Butterflies may not be able to spell, but they are part of God's alphabet that spells out His love for us. Nature is one of God's appointed means for revealing Himself to us, and its messages of God's love are written everywhere. It is a universal language that needs no translation into human words, because it speaks to us in the language of the heart. So, what does one of Sandved's butterflies, and not just the letter on its wing, say to us about our Creator?

Consider This: What has nature taught you about God?

► **STEP 4—Apply**

- 1 Arrange a Sabbath outing to go into nature. Find a natural object and contemplate how it reveals something about God to you. Share this insight with your class.
- 2 Paint a picture or write a poem about the object you collected. Show your painting to the class. Share what spiritual truth it teaches you about God. Or describe the object in your poem. End the poem with what the physical description of the object reveals to you about God.

Close the lesson with prayer, asking God to help each one to be both an active and silent communicator for Him.

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “A True Knowledge of God,” pp. 409–426, in *The Ministry of Healing*; “God in Nature,” pp. 99–101, in *Education*.

“Christ came to teach human beings what God desires them to know. In the heavens above, in the earth, in the broad waters of the ocean, we see the handiwork of God. All created things testify to His power, His wisdom, His love. But not from the stars or the ocean or the cataract can we learn of the personality of God as it is revealed in Christ. God saw that a clearer revelation than nature was needed to portray both His personality and His character. He sent His Son into the world to reveal, so far as could be endured by human sight, the nature and the attributes of the invisible God.”

“Christ revealed all of God that sinful human beings could bear without being destroyed. He is the divine Teacher, the Enlightener. Had God thought us in need of revelations other than those made through Christ and in His written word, He would have given them.”
—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 8, pp. 265, 266.

“The Bible is a wonderful book. It is a history that opens up to us the past centuries. Without the Bible we should have been left to conjectures and fables in regard to the occurrences of past ages. It is a prophecy that unveils the future. It is the Word of God, unfolding to us the plan of salvation, pointing out the way by which we may escape eternal death and gain eternal life.”—Ellen G. White, *Bible Echo*, October 1, 1892, par. 5.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ In class, compare your answers to Thursday’s final question. What can you learn from each other?
- ❷ If God does reveal Himself to us through nature, at least partially, what does this tell us about our need to protect the environment?
- ❸ What are some other ways God communicates with us? How can we be sure it really is God talking to us? What safeguards are there to protect us from deceptions?
- ❹ As a class, plan an outing in nature in which you can look at the revelation of God found there. What things clearly testify to His creative power and love? What things leave large questions still unanswered? Why is nature, however beautiful, still not sufficient to tell us all that we need to know?