

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?

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. 1:25*). 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, long-suffering, 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?

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; Jonah 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?

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.

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.

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:

- 1 In class, compare your answers to Thursday’s final question. What can you learn from each other?
- 2 If God does reveal Himself to us through nature, at least partially, what does this tell us about our need to protect the environment?
- 3 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?
- 4 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?

The Stranger on the Bus

by BENJAMIN D. SCHOUN

One family in the country of Azerbaijan is convinced that the stranger they encountered on a bus was no ordinary passenger.

Gunel's family was mourning the loss of her grandfather. One day Gunel's mother boarded a bus to visit her grandfather's grave. As she sat crying quietly, a woman sat down beside her. She comforted Gunel's mother by telling her that God is good, that Jesus will come again, and that there is hope for the future. The woman told her about a church she could visit to learn more about these things. Gunel's mother thanked the woman for her kind words.

A month later, Gunel's mother saw the woman on the bus again. The woman again encouraged her and gave her the address of the church. Gunel's mother was so moved by the experiences that she asked Gunel to go with her to visit the church on Saturday morning to see what it was like. The two women stood near the church, hesitant to go inside, for they had never been to a Christian church. A church greeter standing saw the two women and crossed the street to invite them in. Inside they were welcomed warmly with hugs and kisses.

After the service, Gunel's mother asked members about the woman she had met on the bus. She described her in detail, but no one recognized the woman from the description. The pastor, who knew all of the Adventists in the city, listened to the description and finally concluded that no such person attended the church. "I think you've met an angel," he told Gunel and her mother.

Gunel's mother continued attending the Adventist church. She studied the Bible diligently and was baptized. Later, Gunel and her brother and sister also were baptized. Now they hold a small group meeting in their home. Many of their friends abandoned them when they left their traditional religion, but they are firm in their faith. Gunel is studying to help Adventist World Radio produce radio programs in the Azeri language.

The family has never seen the woman on the bus again.

Your mission offerings support outreach to Azerbaijan and all of Central Asia through Adventist World Radio and personal evangelism. Thank you.



GUNEL (left). Benjamin D. Schoun is president of Adventist World Radio.