

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?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Galatians 2:11–14*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: How to test a prophet.

Feel: Gratitude that God reveals Himself to us even though we are flawed.

Do: Read the writings of Ellen White, always submitting them to the test of Scripture.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Prophets Under Scrutiny (*Isa. 6:1–10*)

- Ⓐ How do the visions of a prophet inform his or her message?
- Ⓑ According to Isaiah 8:20, what is one important test of revealed truth?
- Ⓒ What is another important test identified in Jeremiah 28:9?
- Ⓓ What important qualifier does Jeremiah 18:6–10 offer to this test?
- Ⓔ What fourth test is found in 1 John 4:1–2?
- Ⓕ What final test does Jesus offer in Matthew 7:15–23?

II. Prophets Are Not Perfect (*Gal. 2:11–14*)

- Ⓐ What do incidents such as the one in Galatians 2:11–14 tell you about the people God uses to reveal His purpose?
- Ⓑ How does it feel to know that God can use you despite your imperfections?

III. Put to the Test (*Jer. 28:5–11*)

Ⓐ Think about how a prophet must feel under public scrutiny. How can we test anyone claiming to have a message from God in a way that is not dismissive or hurtful but strengthens a community's faith in Jesus and God's Word?

Ⓑ How must we put the writings of Ellen White to the test?

► **Summary:** God often reveals Himself to prophets through dreams and visions. But not all dreams and visions come from God. We need to test prophets and their message and accept what is from God.

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?

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1**—Motivate

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Biblically based tests are given to determine whether a prophet is a true spokesperson for God or is speaking on his or her own. These tests strengthen our assurance in God's Word.

(Bring a sample tabloid featuring a prominent modern “seer” to show the class. Or browse the Internet for an article. A third option in lieu of this would be to ask for a volunteer to share a story of someone he or she may have heard about who claimed to be able to see into the future.)

In the day and age in which we live, many people set themselves up as being able to predict the future. Depending on where you live, you need only to glance at the tabloids in the racks as you stand in a grocery line (or wait to pay for your purchases in almost any store) to see many of their names and their predictions. This is especially true as an old year ends and a new one begins.

Jeane Dixon and Nostradamus are two of the more famous prognosticators. What names have you observed today that are popular or becoming popular?

Consider This: What makes these people so popular? Why do otherwise logical people read these predictions and tend more and more to believe them?

► **STEP 2**—Explore

Bible Commentary

I. Dreams, Visions, Angels—Communicators From God

In the beginning God spoke to Adam and Eve face-to-face. Because of sin this became impossible. He then chose to communicate with humans via dreams and visions. Angels also were chosen communicators of what God wanted them to say.

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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.

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

Consider This: Ask someone to read Numbers 12:5, 6. What did God say He would use in His efforts to communicate to His people? Why would He use those ways instead of other ways? What other ways could the Lord communicate to His prophets?

1. Ask someone to read Zechariah 1:9, 13, 14. What did God say about the way in which He spoke to Moses?
2. Ask someone to read Numbers 12:7, 8. What did Moses see when God spoke to him face-to-face?
3. Why do you think it was only the back of God's form that Moses saw?


II. Tests of a True Prophet

Just for Teachers: Prepare the following texts in advance either on individual pieces of paper or on a flip chart: Isaiah 8:20; John 3:27; John 3:34; John 5:39; 1 Thessalonians 5:20, 21.

As we discussed earlier, not everyone who calls himself or herself a prophet really is. However, God does not leave us in doubt as to whether or not we should believe a person who claims to be speaking for God. He has given us specific instructions on how to test any person who claims to have a message from Him. He also has told us how to test the truthfulness of what is said.

Consider This:

1. Have someone read John 3:34. Ask: Even though John is speaking directly about Jesus, how can what he says help us in testing a prophet or their predictions?
2. Have someone read John 3:27. Ask: Where does John say true prophecy comes from?
3. Have someone read John 5:39. Ask: About whom will a true prophet preach? What will he preach about Jesus?
4. Have someone read Isaiah 8:20. Ask: What acid test must be given to all prophecy to prove that it is true?
5. Have someone read 1 Thessalonians 5:20–22. Ask: Once we have tested the prophet and his or her words, what should we do?

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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.

Learning Cycle CONTINUED**III. Ellen G. White—Prophet and Prophecy**

“I said that I did not claim to be a prophetess. Some were surprised at this statement, and as much is being said in regard to it, I will make an explanation. 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. . . .

“My work includes much more than this name signifies. I regard myself as a messenger, entrusted by the Lord with messages for His people.”
—Ellen G. White, Letter 55, 1905, *Selected Messages*, book 1, pp. 35, 36.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church designates Ellen White as a prophetess and includes the acceptance of her in this role as a part of our fundamental beliefs.

Consider This: Based on the information given above, answer the following questions:

1. How well do Ellen G. White’s writings harmonize with Bible doctrines?
2. Has Ellen G. White ever held her teachings to be above the Bible?
3. What emphasis does she put on the Bible?
4. Do her writings include information that generally was not known or understood during her time? (In other words, did she prophesy on various matters before the world had discovered their significance?)
5. Has the church tested Ellen G. White’s writings thoroughly by the Bible standards of testing a prophet?
6. Whom does she uphold as our example and our salvation?

► STEP 3—Practice

Too often in the past (and sometimes even today) Ellen G. White’s writings have been used to browbeat one another and to prove points in a way she did not mean nor ever would have sanctioned. It is safe to say that if she were still alive, she would be writing additional testimonies on that subject. Sadly, as a result of the misuse of her writings, many people have left the church, and many still in the church reject her writings.

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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?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED**Application Question:**

How much do you know about Ellen G. White and what she has written? What has been your life's experience in relation to her and her writings? What can you do to evaluate her and what she has written with an honest and open mind?

Witnessing

Our church spends much time and money to teach people about the Bible. Most of its teaching is targeted on the prophecies. Many books and study guides have been written, classes taught, and evangelistic meetings centered on prophecy. Daniel and Revelation seminars are held regularly in churches.

Consider This: Is this much focus on prophecy important? Why, or why not? What relation does the teaching of prophecy have to the teaching of Jesus and grace?

■ *How can you personally help a person who has doubts about Bible prophecy? What do you need to know before you can help someone else?*

■ *Other churches believe they have been led by modern-day prophets. If you had a friend who believed this, how could you communicate, without being offensive, the importance of testing prophets by the Bible tests?*

► STEP 4—Apply

As adults, we have been influenced by our experiences, our teachers, our parents, and our friends. Sometimes the opinions and beliefs we have collected over the years need to be re-examined for their validity. As our knowledge has grown and as we have gathered new experiences in life, the opinions and beliefs we once held may look different from the way they looked in the past.

Because change is difficult, we may refuse to examine new ideas or new evidence that will cause us to think or act in a different way. You may be unsure yourself about the value of understanding Bible prophecy or its importance in the mission of the church.

Consider This: What steps can you take to help clarify your knowledge and understanding today? How willing are you to change your views as you gain new understanding? How much would a re-study (with an open mind) of Bible prophecy and Ellen White's writings help you in your walk with Jesus?

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?