LESSON 8 *November 14–20

(page 64 of Standard Edition)

Interpreting Prophetic Writings



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matt. 5:17–48; 1 Cor. 16:20; Matt. 4:1–11; Luke 10:25–28; Luke 24:25–27, 44–49.*

Memory Text: **"Then beginning with Moses and with all the Prophets, He explained to them the things written about Himself in all the Scriptures"** *(Luke 24:27, NASB).*

In the aftermath of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, Christ appeared to two downcast disciples, both of whom confessed, " 'We were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel' " *(Luke 24:21, NKJV)*. The disciples expected a Messiah who would deliver the Jews from Roman occupation. This false expectation and consequent disappointment derived from a biased, one-sided interpretation of the Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament.

Christ solved the misunderstanding of these two disciples by explaining the Scriptures to them from a broader perspective *(Luke 24:25–27)*. Christ's interpretation of Scripture opened their eyes and made their hearts burn within them *(Luke 24:31, 32)*. Later, Jesus appeared also to a larger group of disciples in Jerusalem, and "He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures" *(Luke 24:45, NKJV; see also Luke 24:33, 36, 44–49)*.

These experiences highlight the positive results of correctly understanding prophetic writings. A false understanding of prophecy can lead to spiritual disaster.

** Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 21.*

The Bible, Its Own Interpreter

Our interpretation of Scripture is largely influenced by our assumptions. Those who consider the Bible as a mere collection of ancient documents are unable to see any unity among its various books. But by taking into consideration the basic principle that "all Scripture is inspired by God and beneficial" *(2 Tim. 3:16, NASB)*, we can appreciate its underlying unity and allow the Bible to be its own interpreter.

Read Matthew 5:17–48. How did Jesus explain the teachings of the Old Testament mentioned in this passage?

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A superficial reading of Matthew 5:17–48 can give the impression that Jesus was replacing the teachings of the Old Testament with new ones of His own. But a more careful reading makes clear that Jesus was unfolding the deep, spiritual dimensions of the Old Testament. In this sense, He was fulfilling the promise of Jeremiah 31:31–33 that, under the new covenant, God's law would be put in the minds and written on the hearts of His people *(compare with Heb. 8:8–10, Heb. 10:16)*.

Sometimes the interpretation of a given passage is provided within the same book in which the passage appears. For example, in Daniel 2, we find the description of the mysterious dream of King Nebuchadnezzar *(Dan. 2:31–35),* followed by the interpretation of the dream *(Dan. 2:36–45)*. Likewise, in Matthew 13, we have the parable of the sower *(Matt. 13:1–9)* and then its interpretation *(Matt. 13:18–23).*

Sometimes the interpretation of a message is provided by a later prophet. For instance, 2 Chronicles 36:22, 23 confirms the fulfillment of the prophecy of the 70 years, as predicted in Jeremiah 25:11, 12 and Jeremiah 29:10. However, many Old Testament types were fulfilled in Christ, and many Old Testament passages are interpreted in the New Testament.

"The Old Testament is the gospel in figures and symbols. The New Testament is the substance. One is as essential as the other."—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 2, p. 104. Indeed, the New Testament is the inspired interpreter of the Old Testament.

Why is it crucial to be aware of our assumptions as we study the Bible? Why must our most important assumption be that we trust it as the Word of God and that it is to pass judgment on us, not we on it?

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The Historical-Cultural Context

Read Isaiah 65:17–20. What does it mean that in the new heavens and earth a child shall "die one hundred years old"? *(Isa. 65:20, NKJV).*

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Taking Isaiah 65:20 out of its historical setting, one could easily assume the existence of death and sinners in the new heavens and the new earth. But that idea contradicts the promises in Isaiah that the righteous dead will be resurrected *(Isa. 26:19)* and that death and sorrow will finally cease to exist *(Isa. 25:8, Isa. 65:19)*.

Isaiah 65:20 is, obviously, symbolic language. What child is 100 years old? Instead, when reading Isaiah 65:17–20 in its historical setting, we can recognize that the verse was poetically pointing to the blessing that the nation of Israel would receive, but only if they remained faithful to the covenant stipulations *(compare with Deuteronomy 28)*. As Jesus did in Matthew 24, linking more imminent events with later ones, Isaiah does the same here, showing that what would happen now would be a precursor to the new heavens and new earth.

In Isaiah, the new creation is not totally in the future. It has entered suddenly into the present through God's glorious work of redemption and forgiveness. The verse announces that even now, in the present existence of Israel, God is already defeating death. This idea is expressed through the promise of longevity and the elimination of infant mortality *(Isa. 65:20)*. All this only foreshadowed what will eventually come.

Read 1 Corinthians 16:20. How do we apply this text to our time and culture now?

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In the Greek culture of New Testament times, a greeting among relatives and close friends was accompanied by a kiss. Paul gives instructions for this warm affectionate greeting among the Christian believers in Romans 16:16, 1 Corinthians 16:20, 2 Corinthians 13:12, and 1 Thessalonians 5:26. From the context, we can extract the biblical principle of greeting believers warmly and making them feel part of the family of God. In some cultures, kissing would be inappropriate, and a handshake, hug, or bow would be more culturally acceptable. Regardless of the cultural expression, however, Paul encourages us to make people feel accepted and loved in church gatherings.

The Literary Context

A popular preacher's anecdote tells of a man who was facing serious problems and wanted to know God's will for him. He opened his Bible and pointed his finger randomly to Matthew 27:5, which reads, "And [Judas] went and hanged himself" *(NKJV)*. Taken aback by the verse, he repeated the same procedure, attempting to find a more uplifting message, only to have his finger rest on Luke 10:37: "Then Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise' " *(NKJV)*. Both are true verses of Scripture, but they need to be understood in context.

Indeed, many distortions of Bible messages derive from the common practice of isolating passages from their literary context. This approach opens the Scriptures to all kinds of artificial interpretations.

Read Genesis 3:1–5 and Matthew 4:1–11. How did Satan distort God's words by applying them out of context?

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Some people distort the Bible message sincerely because of their own lack of knowledge. But others do so intentionally, as Satan did on the two occasions mentioned in the scriptures above. Regardless of the motivation, the result is always detrimental.

In the Garden of Eden *(Gen. 3:1–5; compare with Rev. 12:9)*, Satan appeared to Eve as an attractive and curious serpent able to speak human language. Wresting God's words from their original context, Satan first generalized them and then offered his own deceitful interpretation.

When Jesus was taken by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness *(Matt. 4:1–11, Luke 4:1–13)*, "Satan came as an angel of light in the wilderness of temptation to deceive Christ."—Ellen G. White, in *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, December 18, 1888. In his dialogue with Christ, Satan misquoted Psalm 91:11, 12 in order to imply that God would protect even those who expose themselves intentionally to dangerous situations.

The Garden of Eden and the wilderness experiences of temptation confirm the existence of the great controversy, which includes the interpretation of God's Word, spoken and written. They should help us to recognize the importance of keeping our understanding of Bible passages faithful to their contexts.

Why must we avoid the temptation to pull texts out of context in order to try to prove our points, no matter how correct our points are?

The Meaning of the Text

All Christians should understand the Bible for themselves. The Bible is clear enough for all people to understand the way of salvation, yet complex enough to consistently challenge the brightest minds. Scripture is an endless treasure of saving knowledge that can never be fully exhausted.

Read **Luke 10:25–28. Some people claim that the Bible does not need to be interpreted. If this is the case, why then did Jesus ask this lawyer, " 'What's written in God's Law? How do you interpret it' " *(Luke 10:26, Message)*?**

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To grasp the meaning of a text, we should first understand the words used. Then we should consider to whatever degree we can how they are used within the associated literary context and the overall biblical context, and also the historical-cultural setting. Finally, our conclusions should be in full harmony with the wider teachings of Scripture. Comparing parallel scriptures—as is often done in the four Gospels—can enrich our understanding.

Compare **Matthew 5:43–48 with Luke 6:27–36. How does the context of Matthew 5:43–48 and the parallel text, Luke 6:36, help us better understand the meaning of "perfect" in Matthew 5:48?**

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One of the most important characteristics of a faithful interpreter of Scripture is a combination of thoroughness and humility. Remember, none of us owns truth; we all see through a glass darkly.

We should always strive for sound doctrine *(2 Tim. 4:1–5)*. A crucial principle to follow is to focus on what we do understand, on what is clear, and to build off of that, which in many cases, over time, will help us understand things that now might not be clear. Short of eternity, there will always be unanswered questions.

Think of a time you didn't understand something that greatly bothered you, only to get it explained later. How should that experience help you trust God on the things in His Word that, for now, you still don't understand?

Biblical Exposition

Our study of the Bible should be focused on two main purposes: personal spiritual growth and leading others into a saving relationship with Jesus. Christ defined the true Christian as one who is guided by the Holy Spirit "into all truth" *(John 16:13)*, who lives " 'by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God' " *(Matt. 4:4, NKJV)*, and who teaches others "all things" that He has commanded us *(Matt. 28:20)*.

Read Luke 4:16–30 and Luke 24:25–27, 44–49. What can we learn from the way Christ explained the Scriptures here?

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Jesus Christ was, still is, and always will be "the way, the truth, and the life" *(John 14:6, NKJV)*. Even so, His preaching was strongly anchored in the Scriptures. For instance, Mark 1:14, 15 says, "Now after John was put in prison, Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand' " *(NKJV)*. The time was clearly pointing to Daniel 9:24–27. In the Sermon on the Mount *(Matthew 5–7)*, He quoted Exodus 20:13, 14 *(Matt. 5:21, 27)*. In Luke 4, He quoted Isaiah 61:1, 2. Jesus was a thoroughly biblical preacher.

In another example, Acts 8 tells us that the Ethiopian eunuch "had come to Jerusalem to worship" *(Acts 8:27, NKJV)*, which means that he was familiar with the Jewish religion and at least with some of its ceremonies. He even owned a copy of the book of Isaiah, which he was avidly reading during the trip home. Yet he could not understand the prophecy of the sin-bearing Servant, so he sought someone to explain it to him.

This experience teaches us a few important lessons. First, the simple reading of a passage of Scripture does not always lead to a deeper understanding of the passage. Second, in the study of Scripture we can, and should, learn from each other. Third, we have a personal obligation to share sound Bible messages with others.

Philip's exposition of the book of Isaiah and other Old Testament passages led the eunuch to baptism *(Acts 8:35–39; compare with Ps. 51:12)*. Our expositions of Scripture should have the same purpose *(see John 17:17)*.

Even though at times we might need help in understanding texts, why must we always be convinced in our own minds of what we believe?

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Reading Ellen G. White

How do we read Ellen G. White? Here are a few guidelines to correctly understand and apply to Ellen G. White's writings.

First, begin with a prayerful, positive attitude and an open mind, rather than a spirit of doubt. Our mindset is a lens that colors all we hear, read, and see. We need the Holy Spirit to guide our thinking. As Ellen G. White herself noted: "If you search the Scriptures to vindicate your own opinions, you will never reach the truth. Search in order to learn what the Lord says."—*Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 112. The same is true regarding her writings.

Second, consider the context of what you read. People have often based their understanding of Ellen G. White's writings on an isolated statement or paragraph fragment removed from its original historical or literary context. Ellen G. White wrote that "time and place must be considered."—*Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 57. This unfortunate practice of ignoring context has caused, and still continues to cause, no end of trouble for some church members.

Third, focus on principles. What is the main point (or points) that Ellen G. White is emphasizing in a particular passage? For example, in 1894, Ellen White wrote to church members in Battle Creek, Michigan, condemning the purchase of bicycles (see *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 8, pp. 50–53). The principle that Ellen White was seeking to encourage was proper stewardship of God-given resources, such as money (back then, bicycles were very expensive).

Fourth, study everything Ellen G. White wrote on a particular topic. Examine obscure statements in the context of her general teaching on a subject. During her lifetime, Ellen G. White lamented the misuse of her writings: "Much that purports to be a message from Sister White, serves the purpose of misrepresenting Sister White, making her testify in favor of things that are not in accordance with her mind or judgment."—*Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 44.

Finally, make sure that Ellen G. White said it. There are numerous statements falsely attributed to Ellen G. White. The safest way to be sure that what we read is from Ellen White is to look for a reference to its source. Once we have verified where it is found, we can examine it using the correct principles.

We have been given a wonderful gift in the prophetic writings of Ellen G. White. It's so important that we properly read those writings, which can be—and are—such a blessing to millions. It is tragic when they are misused and misapplied.

To discover more, visit https://whiteestate.org/absg/8.

Lighting the Flame

At the close of the nineteenth century, the Seventh-day Adventist Church faced tremendous losses: early pioneers had passed away, doctrinal rifts threatened unity, and institutional buildings were lost to fire. Yet, out of this tumult arose a new generation of leaders who would carry the message forward with renewed passion. Among them was Elmer Ellsworth Andross.

Born in 1868 in Minnesota, Andross had dreamed of wealth and political fame, even preparing for a career in law. But his plans were interrupted by a divine calling to join the gospel ministry. Surrendering worldly ambition, he chose the life of a missionary and accepted a bold invitation in 1899: to take the Adventist message to England. It was a financial risk. The Foreign Mission Board could not guarantee support, but Andross and his wife, Sophie, stepped out in faith and arrived in Liverpool full of hope.

That hope soon bore fruit. In Liverpool, Andross helped organize a vibrant new church of about 40 members. By spring 1900, he was preaching in the Midlands, and soon after, in Birmingham. By the end of July, they had 16 new Sabbath keepers, and interest was increasing. In October, despite unrelenting British weather and primitive conditions, Andross reported with joy, "About thirty persons have promised to keep the Sabbath. . . . I never saw people who seemed to enjoy the truth more. . . . Truly the angels have prepared the way before us."

In 1902, Andross was appointed president of the North England Conference. Under his leadership, membership in North England nearly doubled, and the number of churches grew from six to seventeen.

In 1905, he was appointed to lead the British Union Conference. As union president, Andross vastly improved the organization's financial standing to the point that he could announce that, if the rate of progress continued, they would soon not need financial support from the General Conference. He established the Stanborough Park headquarters in 1907 and supported the creation of publishing, education, and health-work institutions, all essential to a sustainable mission presence. During his three-year presidency, the British Union saw a membership increase of 42 percent, and the number of organized churches also grew, from 31 to 52.

In 1908, illness forced his family's return to the United States, but Andross's legacy in England endured. What began in tents and borrowed halls matured into a structured, vibrant movement and the establishment of a mission-minded church ready to face the twentieth century.

Elmer E. Andross was more than an administrator. He was a pioneer with a pastor's heart. His years in England testify to the power of faith, sacrifice, and vision to shape history. Through him, the Adventist flame burned bright across Britain's shores, and it continues to shine to this day.

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