

The Prophetic Gift



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gen. 20:7, Exod. 15:20, Deut. 18:15, Matt. 11:11, John 6:14, Heb. 11:24–26.*

Memory Text: “Then He said, ‘Hear now My words: If there is a prophet among you, I, the Lord, make Myself known to him in a vision; and I speak to him in a dream’ ” (*Numbers 12:6, NKJV*).

All through history, and even up to the present, we can find examples of people uttering predictions about the future. In most cases, these things never come true. When they do come true, a number of factors could be involved. Could it be sheer luck? Maybe the Lord was in it? Or perhaps the enemy of souls was working to deceive as many as he could?

Sure Satan uses false prophecies and prophets to mislead people. But we can take comfort in knowing God has His true prophets to make known His will.

In Scripture, individuals whom God endowed with the gift of prophecy were people who walked with God. Not that they were sinless, but they strove to live in harmony with God's revealed will. They had a personal relationship with God, and in that context the Lord was able to use them in a special way.

This week we'll take a look at how He used them.

The Week at a Glance: Were the Old and New Testament prophets saints or just ordinary men and women? What role did women prophets play in Israel? What were the differences between apostles and prophets in the New Testament?

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 10.*

Patriarch and Prophet

In Genesis 20:7 we find the first mention of the word *prophet* (Heb. *nabi'*) in the Bible. What was the context in which it was used? What can we learn from the context about what a prophet was and how he or she functioned?

In the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible), the word *prophet* describes the recipient of divine revelation. During the time of the judges the word *seer* (in Hebrew *ro'eh*) appears to have come into use (*1 Sam. 9:9, 11, 18, 19*); then, later, the usage reverted to the older term again.

Prophets were not only spokespersons for God but on occasion were also intermediaries between God and the people. Abraham in Genesis 20 was the intermediary between God and Abimelech—he was to pray to God on behalf of Abimelech.

Abraham is a towering figure in the Old Testament. Three times in Scripture he is called God's friend (*2 Chron. 20:7, Isa. 41:8, James 2:23*). When he was 99 years old, God told him, "I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you" (*Gen. 17:6, NKJV*), a promise that, humanly speaking, seemed impossible. Because Abraham believed God in spite of what human reason told him, he became "the father of all those who believe" (*Rom. 4:11, NKJV*).

Considering that Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son in response to God's command (*Genesis 22*), it seems incredible that Abraham should have lied to Abimelech concerning Sarah (*Gen. 20:2*). However, the situation is only too true to life. "As water reflects a face, so a man's heart reflects the man" (*Prov. 27:19, NIV*). The occasional manifestation of the remaining old nature in the believer, the backsliding of God's children in all ages, and our own sad departures from the path of righteousness are sufficient to explain the deplorable conduct of the "father of all those who believe." How human Abraham was—moments of great faith, moments of deep lapses. What follower of Abraham's God can't relate?

What encouragement can you take for yourself from the fact that, despite Abraham's mistakes and lack of faith, God used him anyway, even mightily? How can we learn not to let our lapses turn us away from continuing to press on ahead in faith?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Numbers 12:6*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: That God speaks to us through other people whom we call prophets.

Feel: Respect and openness toward prophets and identify with them as fellow human beings.

Do: Carefully consider the way in which prophets may speak to us and the church.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. The Role of Prophets (*Deut. 18:14–22, 34:10*)

A Why did God raise up prophets? What was their function?

B What is the significance of the face-to-face experience for the prophet, for God, and for us?

II. Prophets Are Human (*Judges 5*)

A What does Deborah’s story reveal about the way prophets functioned within their community? Why was it sometimes difficult to be a prophet?

B What does the human diversity of biblical prophets tell us about God?

C What mistakes and weaknesses are evident in biblical prophets? What does this tell us about God’s attitude toward us? How do the mistakes and failings of the prophets form our expectations of them and of their writings?

III. Prophecy in the Church (*Acts 2:16–21, 21:8–14*)

A What does the prevalence of prophets in the New Testament suggest about the way God speaks to the church?

B How do you respond to the possibility that God might use someone to speak to us on His behalf? Why?

► **Summary:** Throughout history God has used ordinary people of diverse circumstances to speak on His behalf. These prophets have strengthened, corrected, guided, and encouraged God’s people on their journey toward the Promised Land, where one day we will talk face-to-face with God again.

The First Named Prophet of Israel

The first person called a prophet in the nation of Israel was Moses. Concerning his death, the statement is made, “since then there has not arisen in Israel a prophet like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face” (*Deut. 34:10, NKJV*). Abraham was the father of the nation of Israel, but Moses was the first prophet in Israel’s history—an example for all the prophets who followed him.

What do the following texts tell us about Moses’ personality and character? *Exod. 4:10; 32:11–13, 32; Num. 12:3; 20:10–12; Heb. 11:24–26.* **How** do some of these traits help us understand how he fit into his role as a prophet?

Through his upbringing in Egypt, his strong faith in God, and his personal experience with the Almighty at the burning bush (*Exodus 3*), Moses was well equipped to lead the people of Israel. From Scripture, we know that because of Israel’s repeated failure to have faith in God, Moses constantly was interceding with God for the nation (*Exod. 32:11–13, Num. 14:13–19, 16:46–50*), while at the same time admonishing the Israelites to be faithful.

Following the golden-calf episode at Mount Sinai (*Exodus 32*), Moses spent 40 days with God on the mountain. When he returned from the mountain, his face shone (*Exod. 34:28–35*). The radiant face of Moses was but a reflection of divine glory (*2 Cor. 3:7*). Considering the fact that Moses had the unique privilege of seeing the glory of the Creator, it is small wonder that his face shone after such an experience, but this was not the only reason. The golden-calf rebellion was directed not only against God but also against Moses. The evidence of his communion with God was instrumental in restoring him to his rightful place of leadership. When the people realized where he had been, his role of leader and mediator that had been questioned was restored.

Anyone filled with the Spirit of God will in some way reflect the glorious character of God. Those who live close to God will have a telling effect on the lives of others, though they may not know it themselves.

Who is someone who seems to have a close relationship with the Lord? How is that closeness revealed in their lives? What character traits do they manifest? How can you learn to walk closer to the Lord? What things in your life are holding you back from that closer walk?

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Just as prophets served as mediators between God and His people, we, too, may serve God no matter how flawed we are.

Pearls are an accident of nature. Shells stunted in growth and shaped irregularly are most likely to produce pearls. For a pearl to form, an irritant must first enter the mollusk when the valves of the shell are open for breathing and eating. This irritant is less likely to be a grain of sand than to be a shell-boring parasite, decaying plant debris, molluskan egg, small crab, stray piece of food, or even small fish. The mollusk protects itself by depositing nacreous matter that coats the irritant in layers. Over time this imperfection becomes a pearl. —www.fao.org/docrep/field/003/AB726E/AB726E11.htm.

It is hard to imagine how something so flawed can yield something so beautiful. This should give hope to us when our weaknesses, imperfections, and failures threaten to overwhelm us. If God can take something stunted and oddly shaped like a mollusk and use it to create the perfection of a pearl, is He any less capable of bringing beauty and strength out of our flaws? “My grace is sufficient for thee . . . my strength is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9). So, the next time you are beset by difficulty or hardship or are overwhelmed by your spiritual deficiencies, remember: without the irritant, there would be no pearl.

Consider This: We already have learned that Moses feared to speak in front of Pharaoh because he felt his ability to speak was flawed. What aid did God promise him? What are some of the other weaknesses that other Bible leaders experienced that God helped them to overcome? How does this inspire your class members with hope that God can use them despite their flaws and weaknesses? How has God turned spiritual deformities into “pearls”? How has He used “irritants” to make us stronger?

► **STEP 2—Explore**

Just for Teachers: We will consider the lives of the prophets from the Old and New Testaments to define the work of a prophet.

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Prophets in Israel

Prior to his death Moses told the Israelites: “ ‘The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your midst, from your brethren. Him you shall hear’ ” (*Deut. 18:15, NKJV*). The context indicates that this prophecy had an immediate application to the prophetic leadership of Israel in the years following the death of Moses (*Deuteronomy 18; 34:9, 10; Hos. 12:10*). The prophets from Joshua to Malachi were a partial fulfillment of Moses’ prophecy.

Christ, however, fully could meet the conditions set forth in Moses’ prediction (*see John 1:21, 6:14, 7:40*). He came as the Second Moses, not to free His people from the power of earthly rulers but to free them from the power of sin.

The writings of the prophets of the Old Testament from Isaiah to Malachi are well-known. In addition, there were many other prophets in the history of Israel. Samuel lived during the period of the judges (*1 Sam. 3:20*). Gad and Nathan continued his work (*2 Sam. 12:1, 24:13*). After the division of the kingdom in 931 B.C. we find the prophets Ahijah (*1 Kings 11:29*), Elijah (*1 Kings 18:1*), and Elisha (*2 Kings 2:9–14*) ministering to the people of God.

Prophets came from all walks of life: Jeremiah and Ezekiel were priests, Isaiah and Zephaniah were of royal blood, Daniel was prime minister of Babylon, Samuel was a judge, Elisha was a farmer, and Amos a shepherd. Whatever their backgrounds, all of them were God’s messengers through whom God tried to keep Israel from falling into sin. Some prophets wrote books (*1 Chron. 29:29, 2 Chron. 9:29*), others did not (*1 Kings 17:1, 2 Kings 2:15*); some were counselors to kings (*1 Sam. 22:5*), others preached to the people (*Ezek. 3:17*). After four centuries of prophetic silence, John the Baptist appeared as the last of the prophets of the Old Covenant period (*Matt. 3:1*).

All through the sacred Scriptures we see the Lord speaking to His people through His servants, the prophets. The whole Bible itself is the work of these prophets, delivering the messages that God gave them. No matter how diverse their backgrounds, education, temperaments; no matter the flaws in their characters (with the radical exception of Jesus), these human beings, flesh and blood like us, were used by the Lord to proclaim His messages, messages that still are being proclaimed today in almost every country in the world and will continue until the close of time.

Which prophet can you relate to the most? Which prophet speaks the clearest to you, and why? What have you taken from that prophet’s life and message? How are you able to apply what you’ve learned to your life in a way that changes you for the better?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED**Bible Commentary****I. Abraham: Fervent Yet Flawed** (*Read Genesis 20:7 with your class.*)


The first recorded instance in which the word *prophet* is used in the Bible occurs in Genesis 20. If we look at the story, we see that Abimelech's entire family suffered from a curse because of one man's coveting of Abraham's wife. Sarah and Abraham had lied about being married, mentioning that Sarah was Abraham's half sister but neglecting to mention she was his wife. This was only half the truth—and from the lips of a prophet no less! It was enough to convince Abimelech that Sarah was free to join his harem. And when he took her, God shut up all the wombs of Abimelech's wives. What is so interesting about the narrative is that, despite Abraham's lie, God refers to Abraham as a prophet and makes Abimelech's restoration contingent upon Abraham's intercessory prayer on his behalf. Though many of us are fallen and flawed, God still calls us in our imperfections to serve Him.

Consider This: God still called Abraham, despite his faults. What hope should this give us that God can use us, despite our faults? At the same time, why do the prophets' flaws not give us the license to sin willfully against God while claiming to serve Him?

II. Moses' Intercession: The Work of a Prophet (*Read Exodus 32:11–13, Numbers 14:13–19, 16:46–50.*)

After Israel's rebellion against God with the golden calf, God told Moses He would destroy them and create a new chosen people from Moses. The prayer of Moses prevented Israel's complete extermination as a nation. In his role as intercessor, Moses stood as a forerunner of Christ. Moses does not excuse his people's sin; he, instead, intercedes for them, seeking for God to forgive them. This intercessory role demonstrates some of the work of a prophet.

We also learn that during the time that Moses related God's words to the people, his face was veiled. The veiling of Moses' face makes him a type of Christ. Jesus veiled His divinity with humanity in order to dwell with us. Veiled, Moses represented how God must reveal Himself to us; unveiled, God could not fellowship with us without destroying us. But veiled in humanity, He could fellowship freely with sinners in order to reunite humanity to heaven. The glory reflected in Moses' face equals the

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Prophetesses in Israel

Scripture mentions a number of prophetesses. Who were they? What do the following texts tell us about the role they played in the history of Israel? *Exod. 15:20, 21; Judg. 4:4–10; 2 Kings 22:11–20.*

Miriam, the sister of Moses, is called a prophetess. She is described as leading the women in the Song of Moses and Miriam (*compare Exod. 15:1 and 15:21, NIV*). Moses was the appointed leader of the people of Israel, but his dealings would have been primarily with the men, who were considered the heads of their families. Miriam's task was, perhaps, with the Israelite women. She must have been several years older than Moses (*Exod. 2:1–8*), and according to Josephus she married Hur, who together with Aaron had held up the arms of Moses in the battle with the Amalekites.—*The Works of Flavius Josephus* (Philadelphia: David McKay Publisher), p. 98.

That she was an important person in Israel is seen in the fact that all Israel had to wait seven days until God took away her leprosy after the unfortunate incident with her brother Moses and his wife (*Num. 12:1–15*).

Deborah (*Judges 5*) must have been an extraordinary person. In a society dominated by men, she became a political and spiritual leader, something few women achieved in those days. Deeply spiritual, she ascribed all praise for the victory over the Canaanites to God (*vs. 3–5, 13*); she did not take any glory for herself or Barak.

As a “mother in Israel” (*vs. 7*), she watched over the people with maternal care, counseling and aiding them in procuring justice.

Read Judges 4:1–8. What does this tell us about how highly respected this woman was in Israel at that time?

Another prophetess in Israel was Huldah (*2 Kings 22:14–20, 2 Chron. 34:20–28*). When King Josiah asked her concerning God's will, she prophesied judgment and disaster upon Jerusalem and its people but not in Josiah's day; his eyes were not to see the evil because he humbled himself before the Lord. It is interesting that Huldah was consulted although both Jeremiah and Zephaniah were living at the same time.

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

blessings to be received by God’s commandment-keeping people through the mediation of Christ.


Numbers 16 further demonstrates that the work of a prophet is based on the mediating actions of Moses and Aaron in holding back the deadly plague. (1) Moses acts as God’s mouthpiece (*vs. 46*). (2) Aaron carried the censer from the Holy Place—a censer used only inside the temple—and brought it among the people. The incense symbolized Jesus’ work of intercession and atonement, coming from heaven and down to us. Aaron served as a type of Christ, who came down among sinful humans and offered Himself for their sins.

Consider This: How do the actions of Moses and Aaron in Numbers 16 shed further light on the work of an intercessor? What does this, in turn, teach of Christ’s atoning work for us?

III. Women Prophets: Miriam and Deborah (*Read Numbers 12:1, 2; Judges 4:1–18 with your class.*)

Miriam is the first woman in the Old Testament named as a prophet. She stood second only to Moses and Aaron in power. Miriam claims to possess the prophetic gift, since God has spoken through her. Micah asserts that God delivered Israel out of Egypt through Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. After the deliverance, Miriam led the women in the Song of Moses at the Red Sea. Quite possibly, she could be viewed as organizing the first women’s ministry department of God’s church. In addition to communicating to the people the messages God gave her, she may have taught and reproved the people during a ministry that spanned 90 years.

Later, during the time of the judges, God called another woman, Deborah, to be a prophetess. Deborah listened to cases under a tree between Ramah and Bethel. This arboreal courtroom allowed the people the freest access to her as they came to her for judgment. As a prophetess she corrected abuses and redressed grievances. Verse 8 of Judges 4 tells us just how highly Deborah was held in esteem. So great was her influence that the great warrior Barak, whom God called to deliver Israel from their enemies, refused to go into battle without Deborah marching with him. Her presence would make it clear that the undertaking was God’s will. Barak, a strong and brave warrior, submitted himself to her prophetic guidance. Deborah, though female and no warrior, did not refuse to lead Israel into battle. God shows us through her story that He does not limit Himself to the male gender in calling prophets.

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New Testament Prophets

The Old Testament prophetic period came to an end about four hundred years prior to the birth of Christ. During the period between that end and the birth of Christ, many Jewish books were written, but none were accepted as inspired.

The life of Christ ushered in a new era, in which God again called individuals to function as His spokespersons. Who were some of these New Testament prophets, and what was the difference between them and the apostles? *Luke 1:67; John 1:6, 7; Acts 11:27, 28; 13:1; Rev. 1:1–3.*

In New Testament Greek, the word *apostle* was used of persons in the sense of ambassador, envoy, or delegate. Josephus, for example, used this word when speaking of the ambassadors whom the Jews sent as their representatives to Rome.—Flavius Josephus, *The Works of Flavius Josephus*, p. 11.

In the New Testament, *apostle* carries the concepts of mission and representation. The term appears in the context of Jesus' ordaining and sending forth His disciples on an evangelistic mission (*Matt. 10:2–6*). The apostles were those with special authority from the risen Lord; they had seen for themselves His death and resurrection, something that all the previous prophets hadn't. Some of the apostles, such as John and Paul, were also prophets, but not all apostles were prophets. According to Ephesians 2:20, apostles and prophets together provided the foundational interpretation of what God had done in Christ for humanity.

Read Matthew 11:11. Why was John the Baptist greater than all the Old Testament prophets? What does Jesus mean when He says, “But he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he” (NKJV)?

John the Baptist was the greatest prophet in the sense that it was his privilege to announce the coming of Christ, to whom all the prophets had borne witness (*see Luke 24:27; John 5:39, 46*). Like Abraham, all the Old Testament prophets looked forward to the day the Messiah would come (*1 Pet. 1:10, 11*), but John saw Him in the flesh. Hence, in some sense, the prophetic office in the Old Testament reached its climax in John. At the same time, John the Baptist was only at the door of the kingdom of grace, looking in, while the least follower of Jesus can look back and rejoice in the fulfillment of all the Messianic prophecies through Christ.

Dwell on some of the Old Testament prophecies that pointed to Jesus as Messiah. How can they help strengthen your faith?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

Consider This: What do the ministries of Miriam and Deborah teach us about the work of prophets? What does the fact that God chooses women, as well as men, to serve as prophets, reveal about God?

► **STEP 3—Practice****Thought Questions:**

- 1 What danger is there in focusing on the faults of a prophet as a means of justifying your own sins?
- 2 Which of the prophets inspire you to live a godly life? Why?

Application Questions:

- 1 The Bible says, “all have sinned” (*Rom. 3:23*), but it provides a solution that allows us to escape the “wages of sin” (*6:23*), which is death. What is your understanding of how this solution works? What is it based on? How can you avail yourself of this wonderful provision?
- 2 Because of his sins, Moses did not get to the Promised Land. Do the consequences of your sins discourage you or drive you closer to the Source of salvation? Explain.
- 3 Discuss the impact a forgiving spirit could have on the life of your church.

► **STEP 4—Apply**

- 1 How does your church make a positive difference in people’s lives? How could it do better?
- 2 It was clear for all to see that Moses had been in the presence of God after he descended from Mount Sinai. What about yourself? What about your life reveals your relationship with God?
- 3 What kind of role model do you represent? If not a good one, why not? Why do you not have to be perfect to be a role model?

Read Acts 4:12, and ask the class to pray silently for someone in need.

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “The Test of Faith,” pp. 145–155; “Moses,” pp. 241–256, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.

“During his stay in Egypt, Abraham gave evidence that he was not free from human weakness and imperfection. In concealing the fact that Sarah was his wife, he betrayed a distrust of the divine care, a lack of that lofty faith and courage so often and nobly exemplified in his life.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 130.

“Moses had been instructed in regard to the final reward to be given to the humble and obedient servants of God, and worldly gain sank to its proper insignificance in comparison. The magnificent palace of Pharaoh and the monarch’s throne were held out as an inducement to Moses; but he knew that the sinful pleasures that make men forget God were in its lordly courts. He looked beyond the gorgeous palace, beyond a monarch’s crown, to the high honors that will be bestowed on the saints of the Most High in a kingdom untainted by sin. He saw by faith an imperishable crown that the King of heaven would place on the brow of the overcomer.”—Ellen G. White, *Conflict and Courage*, p. 81.

“The glory reflected in the countenance of Moses illustrates the blessings to be received by God’s commandment-keeping people through the mediation of Christ. It testifies that the closer our communion with God, and the clearer our knowledge of His requirements, the more fully shall we be conformed to the divine image, and the more readily do we become partakers of the divine nature.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 330.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Discuss some of the character flaws found in various prophets and apostles in the Bible. What hope can you take from these for yourself? At the same time, what are the good characteristics seen in many of these people? What hope and promise can you find there, as well?
- ❷ What about some of the so-called *prophets* today, those making all sorts of predictions, many of which are reported in the local newspaper? How should we relate to them? What kind of people are they; what kind of predictions do they make? What can we learn from the contrast between them and the prophets seen in the Bible?
- ❸ In what ways can we, as a church, act in the role of the prophets? In what ways are we called to do just that? How can we better fulfill that role?