

# Interpreting *the* Prophetic Writings



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Isa. 65:17; Mark 1:15; Rom. 2:14–16; Eph. 2:8, 9; James 2:14–26; 1 John 5:12, 13.*

**Memory Text:** “And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself” (*Luke 24:27, NKJV*).

As Seventh-day Adventists we believe that Ellen White manifested the gift of prophecy. The next question, however, is how do we interpret her writings?

Though we believe that her inspiration, *not her authority*, is on the same level as the Old and New Testament prophets, when interpreting what she has written, we must apply the same principles of interpretation to her writings that we do to Scripture. Indeed, principles for interpreting the Bible can be used when interpreting Ellen White's writings, even though the authority of the Bible is above the authority of the Spirit of Prophecy. To use an analogy from American law, one might use the same principles for interpreting a decision of the United States Supreme Court as for interpreting a decision by a lower court, but in the end the decision of the Supreme Court carries the ultimate authority.

**The Week at a Glance:** What is the difference between exegesis and the homiletical use of a biblical text? Why is context so important? Can people who have never heard the gospel be saved? What distinguishes the kingdom of grace from the kingdom of glory?

*\*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 14.*

## Exegesis

Exegesis is concerned with the original meaning of a text. It focuses on what the author wanted to say and what the text meant to the original reader.

**What is the original or exegetical meaning of Romans 2:14–16?**  
*Compare Ezek. 3:17–19, Rom. 10:12–17.*

There is no question that there will be people in heaven who never have heard the gospel. “Among the heathen are those who worship God ignorantly, those to whom the light is never brought by human instrumentality, yet they will not perish. Though ignorant of the written law of God, they have heard His voice speaking to them in nature, and have done the things that the law required. Their works are evidence that the Holy Spirit has touched their hearts, and they are recognized as the children of God.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 638.

On occasion, God, apart from human messengers, reaches out to individuals in heathen lands and saves them. However, they are saved because the Holy Spirit has touched their hearts, and they have responded appropriately as evidenced by their works. They are not saved because they have lived up to their conscience; if they were, then they would be saved by keeping the law, and the New Testament clearly denies that possibility (*Rom. 3:28, Gal. 2:16*). The issue in Romans 2:11–16 is the accountability of Jews and Gentiles, not their salvation. The fact that God is no respecter of persons (*vs. 11*) is illustrated by what Paul says in Romans 2:12. “As many as have sinned without law will also perish without law, and as many as have sinned in the law will be judged by the law” (*NKJV*). Those “without law” are the Gentiles who do not have the written law given to the Israelites on Mount Sinai. However, they will perish, not because they did not have the written law but because they are sinners who have transgressed against the law “*written in their hearts, their conscience*” (*vs. 15*).

In the judgment, Jews and Gentiles will be judged and condemned by their respective laws, the Jews by the written law and the Gentiles by the law “*written in their hearts.*” Among the Gentiles, conscience performed the same function as the written law performed among the Jews. Scripture clearly says that “‘there is no one righteous, not even one’” (*Rom. 3:10, NIV*). This means that Jews and Gentiles are sinners alike and are all saved the same way, not by any law keeping but only by Jesus’ death on the cross.

**How reliable a guide is your conscience? Does following your conscience always guarantee that you will make a right decision? Justify your answer.**

## *The Lesson in Brief*

▶ **Key Text:** *Luke 24:27*

▶ **The Student Will:**

**Know:** How to understand and apply the Bible and the writings of Ellen G. White.

**Feel:** A desire to deepen and enrich personal Bible study.

**Do:** Commit to deeper Bible study.

▶ **Learning Outline:**

### I. Exegesis Versus Homiletics (*1 Cor. 6:19, 20*)

**A** What is the original context and intended meaning of this passage? How have we expanded its meaning and applied this verse to other things?

**B** Can you think of any examples in which a preacher has employed Scripture to make a point or communicate an important truth not specifically intended by the writer?

### II. Time and Place (*Jer. 4:23–26*)

**A** What connotations do these verses have for people in the end times? What was Jeremiah denoting in this vision?

**B** Do you sometimes feel distant from the world of the Bible? How can we better identify with the experience of ancient people?

**C** How does an understanding of her time and place help us better interpret the writings of Ellen G. White?

### III. Context (*Isa. 65:17–20*)

**A** How does the immediate context inform the way we interpret this passage? In what way can we apply it to our future?

**B** What dangers are there in taking a passage of Ellen White out of its context? Why is it important to consider all that is said on a particular topic rather than isolated examples?

▶ **Summary:** Just as the interpretation of Scripture requires the use of sound methods of interpretation, so, too, the writings of Ellen G. White need to be studied carefully in order to understand accurately their meaning.

## Homiletics

Homiletics is the art of preaching. In a homiletics class a student learns sermon preparation and how to use the Scriptures in preaching. Sometimes a preacher may use just the wording of a text, without special regard for its original meaning, to make a point or an appeal during a sermon. This is called the homiletical use of Scripture.

### **What** was the kingdom Jesus was proclaiming as being near in Mark 1:15?

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The kingdom that Jesus was proclaiming at that time was the kingdom of grace, which He established at His First Advent. But the text also can be applied to our situation today. A preacher on Sabbath morning may tell the congregation, “All the time prophecies have been fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand.” And he may appeal to them that today we need to repent and believe the gospel. The kingdom that the modern preacher has in mind, however, is no longer the kingdom of grace but the kingdom of glory that Christ will inaugurate at His second coming. The first interpretation of Mark 1:15 is exegetical, the second homiletical.

According to Mark 1:17, Jesus was walking by the Sea of Galilee one day when He saw Simon and Andrew, his brother, casting a net into the sea. Jesus said to them, “ ‘Follow me and I will make you become fishers of men’ ” (*NKJV*), and immediately they left their nets and followed Him.

A modern preacher, using the words of Mark 1:17, may call upon church members to follow Jesus because only He can make us fishers of men. Exegetically the text applies to Simon and Andrew, but homiletically it can be applied to every Christian, because Jesus wants us all to become fishers of men (*Matt. 28:19, 20*).

Ellen G. White frequently used Scripture homiletically. She was steeped in the language of the Bible, and whenever she spoke or wrote on a topic, she used biblical language and biblical texts to convey to the church the message that she had received from the Lord. For example, in the book *Education*, Ellen G. White has a chapter on the study of physiology. Speaking of good posture she says, “Among the first things to be aimed at should be a correct position, both in sitting and in standing. God made man upright, and He desires him to possess not only the physical but the mental and moral benefit, the grace and dignity and self-possession, the courage and self-reliance, which an erect bearing so greatly tends to promote.”—*Education*, p. 198. That “God made man upright” is a quote from Ecclesiastes 7:29 (*NKJV*), but when Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes, he was referring to moral uprightness, not to posture.

## Learning Cycle

### ► **STEP 1—Motivate**

**Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: God has appointed the means for us to interpret His prophetic messages correctly.**

During World War II, Allied intelligence intercepted numerous messages. This offered a tremendous battlefield advantage. There was one problem: *having* the messages did not mean *understanding* them. Knowing that messages could be intercepted, the senders had disguised them in code. Allied teams of code breakers were assembled to find out what the messages were saying. Their success turned the tide in favor of the Allies.

God has sent messages. They are useless, however, unless we understand them. Since the messages were given ages ago in cultural settings different from ours, in other languages, and to a variety of personalities, God's messages effectively can be disguised. Perhaps this explains why so many Christian denominations all claim to tell the biblical messages. Fortunately there is a system of principles that enables us to *decode* the messages. Two words are important to the system: (1) *hermeneutics* and (2) *exegesis*.

“Hermeneutics is the field of theological study that deals with the interpretation of Scripture. Often, it is characterized as being primarily concerned with the theory or theories of interpretation, and in this respect it can be distinguished from exegesis, which may be thought of as a practical application of hermeneutical principles.”—*The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996), p. 415.

### ► **STEP 2—Explore**

## Bible Commentary

### I. Exegesis (*Ezekiel 3:17–19; Romans 2:14–16, 10:12–17*)

Words take meaning from their context. Taken out of context, they may say something quite different from what was intended. If we heard that someone had *fixed the works* of a clock, we would think of moving parts, not musical scores.

The point is simple: to understand words or units of speech, context

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## Time and Place

A crucial rule of biblical interpretation is the principle of studying the times and circumstances during which a particular text was written and by whom.

### **What** is Jeremiah describing in Jeremiah 4:23–26?

When most Adventists read these texts, they think of the millennium. However, when Jeremiah wrote this text, around 600 B.C., he was not thinking of the millennium. The context of this passage is the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.

God, through Jeremiah, pleaded with His people to turn from their evil ways, but they would not listen. In verses 23–26 the prophet sees in vision what will happen if they disobey. In poetic language he describes the waste and desolation that will come upon the land of Judah because of their disobedience. The crucial point is that when a text was written and under what circumstances need to be taken into account when we seek to interpret it.

What happened with Judah and Jerusalem in 586 B.C. is a symbol of what will happen to the world in the future. When Jesus comes and the earth is cleansed with fire, Jeremiah 4:23–26 will be an apt description of this earth during the millennium. Thus, exegetically, Jeremiah 4:23–26 refers to the destruction of Jerusalem. Symbolically, however, it also refers to the time of the millennium. Ellen G. White, therefore, quotes from Jeremiah 4 to describe the situation on earth during the millennium.—*The Great Controversy*, p. 659.

In reading Ellen White, we also need to take time and circumstances into account. For example, in 1897 Mrs. White wrote that “the money expended in bicycles and dress and other needless things must be accounted for.”—*Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 398.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the bicycle was not an economical means of transportation but was rather a rich person’s toy. The best early bicycle cost US\$150, an investment comparable to the cost of an expensive car today. People were mortgaging their income for months in advance to buy what was then an expensive luxury item. Within a few years’ time the bicycle became a useful and inexpensive means of transportation, and she never again spoke against it.

Her policy on bicycles was based on the biblical principle of good stewardship. If she were alive today, she probably would apply this principle to other things that people spend frivolously on.

**Time and circumstances are important not just in the interpretation of inspired writings but in all aspects of life. How quick are you to judge the actions of others without getting more background information? How can you improve in this area?**

*Learning Cycle* CONTINUED

must be studied. Context includes time, place, culture, historical setting, the author's frame of mind, the intended audience, contemporary manners and customs, and so forth. Guided by God's Spirit, we can, through careful attention to these factors, know the meaning of Scripture; but ignoring them will produce fanciful interpretations.

**Consider This:** What do the texts suggest about the importance of understanding the biblical context of a particular scripture? What is the danger of not taking a particular text's context into consideration? How do we define what that context is or what it includes?

## II. Homiletics (*Mark 1:15, 17*)


**Consider This:** In 1 Corinthians 6:18–20, the context suggests that the human body is God's temple. Three chapters earlier (*1 Cor. 3:16, 17*) Paul calls the body of believers, that is, the church, God's temple. In chapter 3, Paul warns that if believers destroy God's temple, the church, God will destroy them. Some preachers have exercised license with these verses, reasoning: (1) human bodies are God's temples (*1 Cor. 6*); (2) Paul says if we destroy God's temple, God will destroy us. The problem is that the temple of 1 Corinthians 3:16, 17 is clearly the church ("body of Christ"), not the human body. (If we already have destroyed our human body, why would God destroy it again?) The preacher's good intention is to encourage us to care for our bodies. Does this justify blending these verses out of context? Explain. What larger principle about interpretation does this give us?

## III. Time and Place (*Jeremiah 4:23–26*)

In Jeremiah 10:3, 4 the Lord rebukes Israel:

“For the customs of the peoples are futile;  
For one cuts a tree from the forest,  
The work of the hands of the workman, with the ax.  
They decorate it with silver and gold;  
They fasten it with nails and hammers  
So that it will not topple” (*NKJV*).

Sincere Christians have applied this to the custom of decorating Christmas

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## Immediate Context

**Read** Isaiah 65:17. What is the new heaven and new earth to which Isaiah is referring? Is it the new earth that Christians expect in the future?

In the immediate context, Isaiah says, “No more shall an infant from there live but a few days, Nor an old man who has not fulfilled his days; For the child shall die one hundred years old, But the sinner being one hundred years old shall be accursed” (*vs. 20, NKJV*). Death on the new earth? This cannot be the new earth we expect that follows the millennium. What then is the new heaven and the new earth in verse 17?

In this passage Isaiah describes a “new creation” that would have been brought about had Israel, following the restoration from the Babylonian captivity, remained faithful to God and fulfilled the divine commission to be a light to the world (*Isa. 42:6*). Unfortunately, it didn’t, and thus the prophecy, which was conditional, was not fulfilled. This “new heaven and new earth” never became a reality. Nevertheless, in a secondary sense these verses point forward to the new heaven and the new earth to be ushered in at the close of the millennium. But in that “new earth and new heaven” there will be no children born to the redeemed (*Matt. 22:30*), neither will there be any more sorrow or death (*Rev. 21:4*), so we have to be careful how far we seek to push the imagery.

**In** *Christ’s Object Lessons*, Ellen White makes the statement that “those who accept the Saviour, however sincere their conversion, should never be taught to say or to feel that they are saved.” —Page 155. Does this mean we can never be certain about our salvation? *1 John 5:12, 13.*

When we study the context, we discover that she is speaking about whether a person can fall from grace after conversion. Many Christians in her days believed in the doctrine of “once saved always saved.” Ellen White was clearly against this teaching. In context she says, “Never can we safely put confidence in self or feel, this side of heaven, that we are secure against temptation.”—*Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 155.

The immediate context makes it clear that she is addressing the issue of self-confidence and temptations after conversion. We are never secure against temptations, we never can say that we cannot fall, that we are saved and therefore secure from temptation, but this does not mean that in Jesus we cannot have day-by-day assurance of salvation.

**If your hope of salvation rests in what Jesus did for you, how can you then not have assurance of salvation? On the other hand, if you are looking to self, how can you ever have any assurance at all?**



*Learning Cycle* CONTINUED

trees. It certainly *sounds* like a condemnation of the practice—cutting the tree, nailing it to a stand, decorating it with tinsel—but is this the practice God condemned? When we consider time and place (the seventh century B.C. when idolatry was practiced in Israel, but when there was no record of Christmas trees), it becomes clear that the practice rebuked here is the creation of idols. Should we not keep this principle in mind when considering passages that forbid women to talk in church or that discuss proper hairstyles?


#### IV. The Immediate and Larger Contexts

Let's look more closely at a definition of a word we've encountered already in this lesson:

**context:** **1.** the parts of a written or spoken statement that precede or follow a specified word or passage and can influence its meaning or effect. **2.** the set of circumstances or facts that surround a particular event, situation, etc.—*Random House Webster's College Dictionary* (New York: Random House, 1992), p. 294.

Christians approach Romans 15 and Colossians 2 differently, resulting in different interpretations. Some believe that *all* Sabbaths have been eradicated under the new covenant. Others disagree. Does context help resolve the dilemma? In the immediate context of Colossians 2, verse 17 specifies that the matters in question were “a shadow of things to come” (*NKJV*). The question arises, “Were all Sabbaths [holy days] ‘shadows’?”

Study the following hypothetical situation: Suppose Canada conquers the United States. The new government announces that national U.S. holidays will not be observed (for example, Independence Day, Presidents' Day, etc.) Does this mean that Christmas is banned, for it too is a holiday? No. The people we now refer to as Canadians celebrated Christmas prior to the existence of the United States, and the ban was specifically against *national* holidays, not all holidays. By extension, the immediate context of Colossians 2 specifies days that were “shadows,” not *all* Sabbaths. Through their knowledge of the yearly shadow sabbaths (for example, Passover), Paul's first-century readers knew that he meant these *annual* holidays. In Romans 15 the immediate context does little to explain this issue, leading the student to explore the larger context to ascertain the author's intent. The only New Testament controversies regarding which days should be observed are

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## The Larger Context

The larger context refers to what other texts beyond the immediate passage have to say on a particular topic. It can refer to other chapters in a book, the whole book, or to the whole of Scripture.

**Are we saved by grace through faith alone, or do we also need works?** *Eph. 2:8, 9; James 2:14–26. Is Paul in conflict with James on the issue of salvation? What do the following texts have to say on this topic?* *Rom. 3:21–28, Rom. 4:3, Gal. 3:6–12.*

When we look at the larger context in Scripture, what other passages have to say on the topic, we discover that James is not arguing for good works as a requirement for salvation. Rather, he insists that there are two kinds of faith, one valid and the other invalid. Paul speaks about the valid faith that is followed by good deeds. James refers to the invalid faith that stops at the intellectual level, faith that is mere mental assent.

Paul uses the example of Abraham to show that we are justified on the basis of valid, or real, faith. James shows that Abraham's faith was real because it produced good works (obedience). Therefore, we do not need anything but faith, valid faith, to be saved, and our behavior will show if our faith is valid or not.

When reading Ellen White, we also need to look at the larger context in her writings; i.e., everything she has written on a particular topic. We cannot just take one or two statements and run with them. For example, on the issue of meat-eating she has very absolute-sounding statements but also many modifying statements that need to be considered, as well.

In the book *Counsels on Diet and Foods*, she says: "Vegetables, fruits, and grains should compose our diet. Not an ounce of flesh meat should enter our stomachs. The eating of flesh is unnatural. We are to return to God's original purpose in the creation of man."—Page 380. Anyone reading only this statement would have to come to the conclusion that under no circumstances are we to eat meat. However, a few pages further on is this statement: "A meat diet is not the most wholesome of diets, and yet I would not take the position that meat should be discarded by every one. Those who have feeble digestive organs can often use meat, when they cannot eat vegetables, fruit, or porridge."—Pages 394, 395. (See also Friday's lesson.) When we look at the total body of what she has written on a given topic, a balanced picture emerges that is invaluable for every Christian who takes religion seriously.

**While we shouldn't make *meat and drink* our religion, God has given us wonderful counsel about diet that can have a positive impact on our health. How careful are you in your diet and all your habits? Why wait until sickness strikes before you make a change for the better?**

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

about the annual feasts. This then forms the natural context for understanding Romans 15. (See *Hebrews 8–10*.)

**Consider This:** Just as Christmas was celebrated in what we know of as Canada today long before U.S. holidays existed, so the weekly Sabbath came from Eden, before Old Covenant sabbaths were established. We understand a conquering nation eliminating national holidays but not Christmas, because it is religion based. Likewise, we are not surprised that “shadow sabbaths” were superseded by Christ’s coming, but does that eliminate the weekly Sabbath?

### ► STEP 3—Practice

#### Application Exercise:

Select a chapter from the Gospels and answer the following questions (answer the majority by reading the chapter[s] before consulting commentaries):

- a. Who wrote it? When was it written?
- b. Who is the intended audience?
- c. Why was it written? What is the apparent meaning?
- d. Why was the authorship important to the original audience?
- e. Are there customs or manners that are difficult to understand? List them.
- f. Are there groups or individuals in the Gospels that I should learn more about? What steps can I take to do so?
- g. How can I apply what I’ve learned to my home, job, family, and personal life?

**Hints:** Always request God’s guidance before starting. Clues about authorship and dates often are found in the opening and closing chapters. Do not rush.

### ► STEP 4—Apply

**Consider This:** Invite class members to write out three things they have learned from this lesson that they will use in their Bible study this week. Share and discuss if time allows.

**Further Study:** Read Ellen G. White, “Christ Our Righteousness,” pp. 35–39; “Ellen White Clearly Draws the Lines,” pp. 41–46; “Faith and Works,” pp. 47–50, in *Faith and Works*.

### Further Guidelines for the Interpretation of Inspired Writings

Apart from the guidelines studied in this week’s lesson, we need to (a) ask for the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the study of His Word; (b) ensure that we use one or more good translations; (c) look for principles that are universal and apply to all people, in all places, and at all times; (d) be willing to obey the truths we discover; (e) be open-minded and willing to surrender previously held positions; (f) guard against extreme interpretations; (g) work together with people of experience; and (h) use common sense.

### Ellen G. White on Once Saved Always Saved

“There is nothing so offensive to God or so dangerous to the human soul as pride and self-sufficiency. Of all sins it is the most hopeless, the most incurable. Peter’s fall was not instantaneous, but gradual. Self-confidence led him to the belief that he was saved, and step after step was taken in the downward path, until he could deny his Master. Never can we safely put confidence in self or feel, this side of heaven, that we are secure against temptation. Those who accept the Saviour, however sincere their conversion, should never be taught to say or to feel that they are saved. This is misleading. Every one should be taught to cherish hope and faith; but even when we give ourselves to Christ and know that He accepts us, we are not beyond the reach of temptation.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, pp. 154, 155.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1 Look at the whole context of the Ellen White quote above. Now look at the one statement about not saying we are saved. How easy to take that one statement out of context and come away with a whole different meaning from what was intended. Why must we always be careful not to pull statements out of context? What other examples can you find of people having done just that? Why is it such a temptation?
- 2 What are some other ways that Ellen White’s writings have been misused? What can we do, however, to avoid the trap of throwing the whole thing out, simply because it has not been used properly?
- 3 Think about what we’ve been given with the health message as it appears in the writings of Ellen White. What great blessings can we take away from it if we use it properly? What traps must we avoid?