

Bible Studies for Adventists



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February 7–13, 2009

Commentary on “The Work of the Prophets”

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Day 1: Sabbath Afternoon, February 7, 2009

This week's lesson is entitled “The Work of the Prophet.” It specifically addresses the efforts put forth by Biblical prophets, the struggles they encounter, their hardships due to conditions in the world and the vindication of their message as history unfolds.

The Quarterly begins on Sunday by asking three questions that will be answered this week. Those questions are:

1. Does the preaching of the gospel in the New Testament differ from the proclamation of salvation in the Old Testament?
2. Why were the early Seventh-day Adventists, who came out of the Millerite movement, opposed to church organization?
3. What were some ways prophets delivered God's messages to His people?

In preparation for answering these questions, some Biblical texts are suggested for study. They include the account of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac in Gen. 22:1-14, Isaiah's description of the suffering Messiah in Isaiah 53, John the Baptist's confrontation with the Pharisees who came for baptism in Matt. 5:1-5, and Paul's decision to hand over the immoral Christian to Satan “for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus” (NASB) in 1 Cor. 5:1-5.

A suggestion is made that the life of Ellen White paralleled the life of Biblical prophets in many important ways. Her and James' various trials will be shown to be similar to the trials faced by many Biblical prophets, particularly the “various assaults of Satan” and their material and physical needs.

There have been many very sincere religious people since the time of Christ who have suffered through trials in this world, many professing the name of Christ as their Lord. The various trials in their lives are often attributed to Satan and human efforts to counter the message brought by these individuals. As Christians are involved in countering these different movements, one must determine why Christians are opposed to them. The messages of these individuals must be examined, as well as the various methods used to counter them.

This week will provide ample opportunity to do exactly that.

Summary

There have been many sincere people in this world. Sincerity has never been an indication of truth. Many people have been sincerely wrong. This week will provide an opportunity to examine the life of Biblical prophets, compare the work of Ellen White to then and make a determination as to the nature of her work.

Day 2: Sunday, February 8, 2009

The lesson for today begins with an emphasis on the importance of the preaching of the gospel, an emphasis reiterated many times in the New Testament. To begin the study, the first question asks where the gospel of salvation is found in the Old Testament, and then provides insight into these early gospel messages. It is stated that "The plan of salvation was explained to Adam and Eve as soon as they had sinned." Checking this "protoevangelium" (first evangel) in Genesis 3:15 we find: "And I will put enmity Between you and the woman, And between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, And you shall bruise him on the heel." (NASB)

The first question in todays lesson is, "Where do we find the gospel of salvation in the Old Testament?"

To state that the gospel was "explained" to Adam and Eve "as soon as they had sinned" is to read into the text something that is not there. This is a practice called "eisegesis." It is the opposite of exegesis, which is the science of extracting information from what is present in a text. Eisegesis is "reading into" the text information that is not contained there. The good news is contained throughout the Old Testament. To claim that any Old Testament character, including Abraham or Daniel, fully understood what they were being told is putting information into the text that is not contained there. Even John the Baptist, the greatest of the OT prophets, did not fully understand what he was doing.

Eve did understand that through her a seed would come, one who would redeem fallen mankind, but her understanding was very limited. She named her first-born Cain, because she said, "I have gotten a man-child with the help of the Lord." Apparently Eve had no understanding of the unfolding of human history. Her's was not a specific knowledge.

As has been said by many men and women of God in Christian history, the gospel is, in the Old Testament, concealed; in the New Testament, revealed. Men and women are saved in only one way throughout human history: by grace, through faith. The faith of Abraham is the kind of faith that all people are called to have at all times. It is only in the New Testament that the details of who Jesus is and his work for us on the cross is fully revealed.

The second question in todays lesson is, "Does the preaching of the gospel in the New Testament differ from the proclamation of salvation in the Old Testament?"

The Old Testament is a two-part book. The first eleven chapters of Genesis provide the first history of the nations of the world, from the creation of mankind to the dispersion from the Tower of Babel. The remainder of the OT provides a specific detailed history of Israel, with some references to these other nations as they are encountered in Israel's history.

The details of the gospel are not preached in the OT. The OT provides us a history of God's preparation of a people for the coming of the Messiah. When the gospel is preached in the NT, some of the people of Israel are ready to hear it. Also, the gentile nations that were in idolatry throughout OT times are ready for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and even surpass Israel for a time in being grafted into the true vine.

In the lesson, much is made of the focus of Ellen White on the person of Jesus Christ, with the "more than eight thousand references to the gospel and six thousand references specifically to Jesus Christ and His sacrifice on the cross." It is not correct to compare the veiled references in the Old Testament to the clear declarations of the Jesus in the New. Nor can we compare the number of references in the New Testament to the references in the writings of EGW, or the wrong conclusion may be reached. The name "Jesus" is mentioned 979 times in the New Testament, and "Jesus" is mentioned seven times. The term "gospel" is mentioned ninety-nine times, and "gospel's" is found twice.

The Bible would be ranked significantly lower than the writings of many modern religious persons, perhaps even lower than the writings of many atheists. Demons are preoccupied with Jesus. This does not mean that they are in God's will. We must be careful when comparing statistical data about someone, rather than examining all things, and holding only to that which is good. (Remember the three kinds of lies: Lies, damed lies, and statistics!)

The summary on page 79 of the Teacher's Quarterly does provide a statement of some functions of a prophet. However, the people of God are not asked to "understand and accept His plan" of salvation. God's people are asked to accept his Son. Understanding is often a way of excusing oneself from the responsibility to believe. Abram and Sarai were definitely not able to understand God's promises. They believed, nonetheless. As we turn to Monday, the third study in this week's lesson, we should begin by asking the following questions: "Do I believe in Jesus?" "Am I watering down my faith in Jesus by adding something to that belief that is of my own understanding?" "Am I being influenced by people who seem to have spiritual statistics on their side, or am I relying on the Holy Spirit, and his revelation of Jesus through scripture?"

Summary

- The Old Testament promises of God regarding a redeemer for mankind were veiled. On this side of the cross we do a disservice to the OT patriarchs by assuming they had all the information that is available to us. This is not to say that they are saved any differently than we are saved.

- We are practicing eisegesis when we read into the text information and meanings that are available to us but was not available to the patriarchs
- Statistics are not an indicator of the spirituality of an individual nor do they indicate the truth of a message. The number of references in the Bible to Jesus and the gospel are far outweighed by the number of references in the writings of Ellen White.

Day 3: Monday, February 9, 2009

Today's lesson begins to address two issues: How God has guided his people, and the issue of establishing an organized church. Examples from the infant Christian church are provided, with which parallels are made to the early Adventist church movement. Underlying this lesson is the belief from previous lessons that the gift of prophecy at work in the early church is equivalent to the work of an Old Testament prophet.

The first question is prefaced by the statement that, "Jesus appointed Paul and the Twelve Apostles, some of whom also had the prophetic gift, to lead and guide the early Christian church." After a very brief statement on some of the struggles within the early Christian church, a statement is made that "The early days of our church had numerous struggles, as well." One must be careful to delineate between the establishment of the early Christian church and later developments within Christianity. God established his church against which the gates of hell have not prevailed. An attempt is made to show parallels between the early Christian church and Adventism. There is no parallel.

When Adventism was in its formative years, it rejected the counsel and guidance of Christians. Only if one was in agreement with the Adventist specifics was one accepted as a part of the movement. Christians who differed on secondary issues, such as eschatological understandings, teachings on foods and the like, were demonized by the early Adventists. Adventism has continued to view itself as a movement restoring truths that have been lost over the last 1900 years. This flies in the face of Jude verse three, which indicates that our faith had been delivered to us once and for all. There was a finality to that first delivery. For a movement to begin, ignoring counsel from Christian men and women, and establishing itself as God's "remnant" must divorce itself from the fact that God has always led his people. (Even William Miller accepted counsel from fellow Christians and repented of his errors and returned to Christian fellowship.)

The parallels made in this lesson between the infant Christian church and the infant Adventist church could not have more greatly missed the point. A parallel is made between James White's efforts to organize the early Adventist church, Ellen White's vision that "gospel order has been too much feared and neglected," the eventual formation of the SDA church, and the formation of the Christian church. The most serious problem with this presentation is the fact that James and Ellen White denied the full deity of Jesus Christ. (Ellen later affirmed his full deity, but her early works were heretical on this. See the four volumes, *Spiritual Gifts*, written from 1858 to 1864.) One need only check volumes such as *The Trinity*, or *Crosscurrents in Adventist Christology* (both written by Adventists) to see the inherent problems with teachings on the person of Jesus in early Adventism.

Today's lesson is titled "Guiding God's People," yet one can guide God's people directly into heresy if Jesus is not presented as God's final revelation to us (Hebrews 1:1-3.) As has been said by many in various ways in the history of the Christian church, you may be correct on all your doctrines, but wrong on the person, nature and work of Jesus Christ and be wrong enough to lose your soul for all eternity.

The lesson ends with a suggestion that it would be better to remedy problems in the church (meaning the Seventh-day Adventist church) without leaving the church. The question is, "How can you better serve the organized church and help remedy aspects of it that you believe could use improvement?"

This question implies that the organization that one is a part of is Christian. A church organization that is not in alignment with Biblical statements about Jesus, his ministry, or the permanence of the church he organized, is not an organization that can be "remedied." Any church that denies the leading of the Holy Spirit throughout the history of Christianity is denying the Holy Spirit, and is not Christian.

Tomorrow's lesson will specifically address Ellen White's testimonies regarding individual and personal sin.

Summary

- The infant Christian church may have had struggles, but those struggles were of an organization against which the gates of hell have not prevailed. They were struggles dealing with human sin and false teachings that abound whenever the truth of Jesus Christ is present.
- The early Adventist movement was founded upon a false expectation. The early Adventist leaders were engaged in a heresy, that Christians had dealt with over 1500 years before. Adventist historians are now open to acknowledging the presence of this demotion of Jesus in early Adventism.

- There are no accurate parallels between the early Christian church and any religious movement since that time. To draw parallels is to demote Christianity to the level of a human invention.
- The “Messenger of the Lord” did nothing to address the anti-Trinitarianism of early Adventism. James White and other early SDA leaders were allowed to carry on without acknowledging this error, an error that is seeing a resurgence in the Adventist church in the 3rd millennium.

Day 4: Tuesday, February 10, 2009

Today's lesson is dealing with one issue: the work of God in revealing sin to individuals. Examples are given from Kings, Isaiah, Amos, Malachi and Matthew. Each of the examples from Scripture show how God often gives messages to groups of individuals and pronounces curses on the unrepentant. The lesson then asks, “How did Ellen White deal with messages of reproof for individuals?”

Again, parallels are attempted to show how Ellen White is following the same method used by OT prophets. From a practical aspect, there is no area of Ellen White's ministry by which more people were damaged, save from her demotion of Jesus, which has more serious eternal consequences. Books have been written by individuals dealing with areas of sin in the lives of individuals. Sometimes these books find their way onto the shelves of Christian bookstores, but do not remain there long. Often, these books are never available through Christian bookstores but only through the larger secular bookstores.

Ellen White is quoted at length for today's lesson. To provide a proper understanding of the issue, the following is copied from the lesson:

“Were I, in order to prevent suspicions and jealousy, to give a full explanation of my course, and make public that which should be kept private, I should sin against God and wrong the individuals. I have to keep private reproofs of private wrongs to myself, locked in my own breast. Let others judge as they may, I will never betray the confidence reposed in me by the erring and repentant, or reveal to others that which should only be brought before the ones that are guilty.” Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1, pp. 584, 585.

The fact is that one can walk into virtually any Adventist Book Center and purchase a handsomely-bound, nine-volume set of writings titled *Testimonies for the Church*, by Ellen G. White. These volumes written from 1855 to 1909 include numerous accounts of “sins” shown to Ellen White in vision, and sometimes through other means.

It is apparent that she has not kept these reproofs private, locked in her own breast. She and the SDA church have done the exact opposite of what she is here claiming. If we are to judge her by her own words, she has sinned against God and wronged the individuals. These volumes are massively reproduced, so much so that the church, upon printing the fourth edition, had to state that the plates were being worn out from the amount of printing being done. The preface to the fourth edition from May 1, 1947 states, “The many printing impressions necessary to meet the continual and ever-widening distribution of the *Testimonies for the Church* have worn out the printing plates.”

Wearing out printing plates seems somewhat less than keeping these sins private.

Summary

- The examples from scripture provided for today's lesson deal with very general reproofs and pronouncements of sins of groups of people. There are more specific examples of the sin in individual lives, yet God only allowed a very small amount of that material in the Bible.
- Ellen White's voluminous writing of specific sins in the lives of identifiable persons even goes against her clear statements in *Testimonies*, Vol. 1 and elsewhere. She not only made those sins a matter of public record, the SDA church has continued to mass-produce those writings, even wearing out printing plates in the process.

Day 5: Wednesday, February 11, 2009

Today's lesson, "Communicating God's Will", is a look at some of the ways in which God's messages were delivered through his prophets. It is shown that Ellen White, like some Biblical prophets also had some reluctance to share what she had been shown. The author of the lesson again resorts to the method of statistical support for her ministry, by finishing the lesson with the statement, "When Ellen White died, she left behind about one hundred thousand pages of published and unpublished material."

When one encounters the work of one individual who wrote by hand, without any of our modern technology, the question must be asked, how did one person write so much? The Ellen G. White Estate does not deny that she had literary assistants. However, the understanding of what those literary assistants provided has been modified as new information has been revealed about the sources of Ellen White's literary output. (Please see commentary for day 2 above regarding the use of these kinds of statistics.)

At the end of the lesson, the question is asked, "What do the writings of Ellen G. White mean to you personally?" The form this question takes is one that, since the 1970's, has become increasingly popular among Christians. Ever since Gadamer's *Hermeneutics*, people have believed that asking "What does it mean to me?" is a primary concern for the Christian. According to one professor at Talbot Theological Seminary, that is the last question a Christian should ask. Of course, the subject in question is the Bible. However, in Adventism, little distinction is made between the writings of Ellen White and the Bible. A distinction may be made on a theoretical level, but on the practical level her writings are as authoritative as any statement from scripture.

Effort is rarely made to ask whether her writings are in harmony with the Bible. The Bible is searched to identify support for statements that she makes. Rarely, in some settings never, is an error in her writings allowed to be questioned based on the fact that the Bible contradicts one of her statements. Rather than asking what her writings mean to you personally, it may be more important to ask, "What does the Bible say about her writings?"

As we end these first five days of study this week, we are about to delve into an area on which there is great disagreement and much discussion among Christians of all denominations.

Summary

- Communicating God's will is a matter of proclaiming truth. The last question Christians should ask is what God's communication means to me. The first question to be asked when examining extra-biblical sources of information is, "Is this true?"
- For the second time this week the lesson author resorts to statistical data to bolster the image of Ellen White. Statistics do not indicate whether something is true. The Bible must be the ultimate source of truth for the Christian.

Day 6: Thursday, February 12, 2009

The lesson that starts today and concludes with Friday's study is about Ellen White's prediction of the joint effort between Protestantism and Catholicism. The quarterly quotes, "When Protestantism shall stretch her hand across the gulf to grasp the hand of the Roman power, when she shall reach over the abyss to clasp hands with spiritualism . . . then we may know that the time has come for the marvelous working of Satan and that the end is near." Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 451.

The lesson claims that in 1885, when these words were penned, the ecumenical movement was a long way in the future, but that in 1994, there was "a stunning fulfillment of prophetic trends."

There are several problems with this claim. First, the ecumenical movement was not a long way in the future. The ecumenical movement had been an effort among some Christians from the time of the Protestant reformation. This ecumenism was being pursued in 1885 when Ellen White penned these words it was the original effort of Martin Luther to not divide the church that he loved but to unite the warring factions that existed in the Catholic church long before he was born, and it will be an effort amongst individuals and some groups to the end of time. It does not take a prophet but an historian to see these facts.

Second, the document that is mentioned in the lesson, *Evangelicals and Catholics Together*, was, as is stated, signed by 39 leading evangelical Protestants and Roman Catholics. Thirty-nine is not a very large number. Given the size of the two movements, Protestantism and Catholicism, these thirty-nine are not representative of many individuals, and then only of portions of the organizations from which they come. This number is even smaller when taking into account the orthodox churches and other Christian communities in this world.

Third, the fact that a number of the original signers of this document have subsequently met and discussed the very real differences between Protestants and Catholics, particularly the differences in understanding of justification, is completely

ignored. These individuals prayed for one year and met October 6 and 7, 1997, in New York City, where they admittedly had even more to discuss and clarify than what they began with. Also in 1995, three of the Southern Baptist signers have met and attempted to resolve misunderstanding and be more explicit.

Fourth, so many Protestants and Catholics have reacted negatively to this document, that they far outnumber the signers, those in harmony with the intention of the document, or those they claim to represent. Even Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*, stated that for true ecumenism to work, the Protestants must come back to the mother church and recognize their need of and dependence upon her.

Protestantism and Catholicism have never been further apart. For these two movements to be brought together, something much more sinister and Satanic must be at work than merely the mending of a 500-year-old divide. If a one-world religion is in our future, it is not the factions within Christianity, regardless of the incorrectness of some very important Christian doctrines, that should be feared.

Before we move onto Friday's lesson and the conclusion of this study, a question from the Teacher's Quarterly must be addressed. On page 87 a seemingly innocent question is asked. "How do you or should you respond to changes the church at large or your local church makes in regard to the order of service? Evangelism methods? Music? Methods of teaching?"

This question and its derivatives are addressing practices, not doctrines. Often, the experience of Adventists has to do with division in the church over these practices. There is a deception inherent in this question. The deception is that these practices are what must be addressed before doctrinal issues can be tackled. It is again putting the cart before the horse, or asking "what does this mean to me" rather than "what does this mean" or "is this true?"

To continue entertaining these types of questions is just that: entertaining. Where are the Daniels, the Josephs, the Abrahams and Esthers who, regardless of consequences, are ready to stand up for the truth of the Word of God. Who are ready to say with Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to give you an answer concerning this matter. If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But even if He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up." (Dan 3:16-18) Or with Esther, "Go, assemble all the Jews who are found in Susa, and fast for me; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maidens also will fast in the same way. And thus I will go in to the king, which is not according to the law; and if I perish, I perish." (Esther 4:16)

Whether the Lord delivers us or not, or whether we perish or not, is not important. Making much of God and little of ourselves is the only thing that matters in this short life.

Summary

- The ecumenical movement has been alive for much longer than is presented in the lesson. It was not a future event in 1885 as is presented. It is an effort that has been going since the time of the Reformation. There were even Reformation efforts going on in the Catholic church long before the time of Martin Luther, since at least the year 1000 AD.
- The modern effort by a small number of Evangelical Protestants and Catholics is not indicative of a large movement by Protestantism reaching across the gulf to Rome. Protestantism and Catholicism are strongly divided and they will remain so. Many involved in that effort have since written statements of clarification regarding their positions. The lesson author ignores these developments that have been going on for more than ten years.
- Christians must stop making much of human effort and start making much of God. Like Esther, Daniel and others, whether God delivers us or not, whether we perish or not, is irrelevant. We must start ignoring the efforts of man to destroy the work of God and begin glorifying God in all things.

Day 7: Friday, February 13, 2009

This last day continues in the vein begun with Thursday's lesson regarding the union between Protestantism and Catholicism.

One of the suggestions for further study at the top of the page must be addressed. The book *The Great Controversy* is often used by the Adventist church to show how God has used Ellen White in bringing his final warning to earth's inhabitants. Near the bottom of the page is a suggestion for the student to do a little research regarding Catholic-Protestant relations. I would suggest that anyone interested do a study of *The Great Controversy*, the sources used, and some of the historical errors that have been included in this work. Then, rather than asking what does this book mean to me, or how has God used this book in my life, ask the first question: Is this true?

In today's study, only a couple of statements need to be addressed. Regarding Catholic-Protestant relations, it is stated that "such a reconciliation seem[ed] impossible. Today, of course, the impossible has become all but inevitable, as time and again Catholics and various Protestants are coming together on a whole host of issues."

There is no inevitability here, only probabilities. The only inevitable facts in this universe are that man has fallen into sin, God is unquestionably righteous, and Jesus is his way of bringing us back into fellowship with him. Some of us, not just Adventists, are guilty of making much of things other than Jesus. Paul provided a stern warning to those in his day who were making much of things other than Christ and him crucified. The entire issue of any of these unofficial agreements between some Protestants and some Catholics is based on an ignorance of numerous historical facts, and much speculation.

The fact that an organization with over 15 million members is dedicating an entire Sabbath School Quarterly to the discussion of one person's supposed spiritual gifts is an indication that much is being made of one person, and that can come only as less is made of Jesus Christ. The two are not compatible. We cannot make much of Ellen White and at the same time make much of Jesus Christ.

The lesson this week ends with the statement, "Though there's still much to unfold, these events are leading to an amazing fulfillment of prophecy and are another powerful vindication of Ellen White's prophetic gift."

Continue to vindicate Ellen White's "prophetic gift" at the expense of Jesus Christ and there will be rewards to reap. Lift up Jesus Christ at the expense of Ellen White, and of all men and women who have ever lived, and there will be rewards to reap. We deceive ourselves in thinking that we can do both. Which rewards would you choose?

Summary

- Over 15 million Adventists around the world are dedicating three months to the study of the spiritual gifts of one person. How does this lift up Jesus Christ?
- When our focus is on one sinful human being, regardless of how holy that person may be, we ignore God's commandment as stated by the apostle Paul. We should know nothing amongst ourselves but Christ and him crucified.