Interpreting Prophetic Writings



Week Eight: November 15–21
Read This Week's Passage: Acts 8:26–40

The Meaning of the Text
inTro

Prophetic writings never come with a guarantee that everyone will properly interpret the message. Hearing various people interpret the same message in very different ways can be confusing. How a person interprets a prophetic message is highly consequential. Correctly interpreting prophetic writings points people in the right direction, but a false understanding of prophecy can lead to spiritual disaster.

In the aftermath of His crucifixion and resurrection, 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). The disciples expected a Messiah who would deliver the Jews from the Roman occupation. This false expectation and consequent disappointment were derived from a biased, one-sided interpretation of the Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament.

Christ resolved these two disciples' misunderstanding 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 to a larger group of disciples in Jerusalem, and "He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures" (Luke 24:45; see also Luke 24:33, 36, 44–49).

These experiences highlight the importance of correctly understanding prophetic writings. The events surrounding Christ's death confused and deeply troubled the disciples. They were familiar with the scriptures foretelling the Messiah's suffering and death, yet they missed the implications until Christ showed them.

Like the disciples, we too must seek a true understanding of Scripture. 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.

Some people claim the Bible does not need to be interpreted. If this is the case, why then did Jesus ask the lawyer, "What's written in God's Law? How do you interpret it" (Luke 10:26, MSG)? Jesus answered people's questions by directing them to relevant teachings of Scripture and probing their interpretation.

The Bible is clear enough for all people to understand the way of salvation, yet complex enough to consistently challenge the brightest minds.

How we interpret the meaning of a text determines the conclusions we come to—whether right or wrong. To grasp a text's meaning, we should first understand the words used, then how they're used within the literary context and the overall biblical context, and also the historical and cultural setting. Finally, our conclusions should be in full harmony with the wider teachings of Scripture. Comparing parallel scriptures can enrich our understanding.

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." 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.'" A final attempt led him to John 13:27: "Then Jesus said to him, 'What you do, do quickly.'" All these are true verses of Scripture, but they must be understood in their contexts.

Indeed, many distortions of Bible messages are derived from the common practice of isolating passages from their literary context. This approach opens the Scriptures to all kinds of false interpretations. Some people distort the Bible's message simply because of their own lack of knowledge. However, others do so intentionally, as Satan did in both the Garden of Eden and while tempting Jesus in the wilderness. Regardless of the motivation, the result is always detrimental.

Among 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" (1 Cor 13:12, KJV).

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's clear, and to build from that, which often, over time, will help us understand things that now might be confusing. Short of eternity, there will always be unanswered questions.



inScribe

Make an outline or mind map of Acts 8:26–40. Especially focus on verses 30–35, writing them out from the translation of your choice or rewriting them in your own words. Notice how Philip helped the Ethiopian understand the meaning of Isaiah's writings.

Circle repeated words/phrases/ideas.

Underline words/phrases that are important and have meaning to you.

Draw **Arrows** to connect words/phrases to other associated or related words/phrases.

What special insights do your marks overall seem to point to?

In New Testament times, many foreigners traveled long distances to visit Jerusalem and seek spiritual renewal. Acts 8 tells of one such visitor from Ethiopia who "had come to Jerusalem to worship" (Acts 8:27). This man was familiar with the Jewish religion and with at least some of its ceremonies. He even owned a copy of the writings of Isaiah the prophet, which he was avidly reading during his trip home. Yet he was perplexed by the prophecy of the sin-bearing Servant found in Isaiah 53. This prophecy remained a mystery to him. He longed for someone to explain the meaning of Isaiah's message and guide his understanding.

In answer to this man's prayer, an angel sent Philip to help this traveler. Hearing him read from the book of Isaiah, Philip asked if he understood what he was reading. The man acknowledged his helplessness and his desire to have someone explain it. Philip explained to his new friend how Jesus was rejected, scorned, unjustly tried, condemned, and executed as a criminal in fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. With great delight, he showed how Jesus died for our sins according to this prophecy and other scriptures.

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 that passage. We need a proper understanding of the background and sufficient knowledge to discern the meaning of a passage. Second, in the study of Scripture, we can and should learn from each other. The Bible is not intended to be studied only in isolation. Third, we have a personal obligation to share sound Bible messages with others. God could use angels, but He sends people to help other people understand His Word.

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

This story provides an example of what our Bible study should be. It 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), and who teaches others "all things" He has commanded us (Matt. 28:20).

Questions to explore:

Even though we sometimes need help to understand the Bible, why must we always be convinced in our own minds of what we believe?

Think of a time you didn't understand something in the Bible, and it greatly bothered you until someone explained it to you. How can that experience help you trust God with the things in His Word that, for now, you still don't understand?

Journal your answers at the bottom of the previous page.

The intended meaning of a biblical passage is not always immediately obvious to the reader. Sometimes a text may appear to say something that contradicts other parts of Scripture. Knowing the cultural and historical context of a passage can help explain the original idea behind it.

For example, taking Isaiah 65:20 out of its historical setting, one could easily assume that death and sinners will be in the new heavens and the new earth. However, 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; 65:19).

Knowing the cultural and historical context of a passage can help explain the original idea behind it.

Isaiah 65:20 is, obviously, symbolic language. After all, what child is one hundred 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 (cf. Deut. 28). As Jesus did in Matthew 24, linking more imminent events with later ones, Isaiah also did here, showing that what would happen in the prophet's time 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 foreshadows what will eventually come.

Other texts of Scripture also challenge today's readers to know how best to apply the text to our present culture and time. For example, 1 Corinthians 16:20 tells believers that they should "greet one another with a holy kiss." In the Greek culture of New Testament times, a greeting among relatives and close friends was accompanied by a kiss. Paul also instructed that this warm, affectionate greeting be given among Christian believers in Romans 16:16, 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 encouraged us to make people feel accepted and loved in church gatherings.

What are some of the most challenging passages of Scripture that have confused you? Where have you found answers to your questions? How do you live with unresolved questions when you find no answers?

Memorize your favorite passage from Acts 8:26–40. Write it out multiple times to help with memorization.



inSpect

How do the following passages help us better understand the importance of properly interpreting God's Word?

Misinterpreting and twisting God's Word:
- Genesis 3:1–5
- Matthew 4:5–7
- 2 Peter 3:16

The need for right interpretation:
- 2 Timothy 2:15
- 2 Peter 1:20

Prayers for good understanding:
- Psalm 119:125
- Daniel 9:13

What other verses/promises come to mind related to properly interpreting Scripture?

Review the passage you memorized from Acts 8:26–40.

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. However, 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.

The New Testament increases our understanding of the Old Testament. For example, Christ's Sermon on the Mount provides deep insight into the spiritual meaning and purpose of the Old Testament laws. 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. However, 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 31:31–34 that under the new covenant, God's law would be put in the minds and written on the hearts of His people (cf. Heb. 8:8–10; 10:16).

Sometimes the interpretation of a given passage can be found within the same book. 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. 13:3–9) and then its interpretation (Matt. 13:18–23).

Sometimes, a message's interpretation is provided by a later prophet. For instance, 2 Chronicles 36:20–23 records the fulfillment of the prophecy of the seventy years, which was predicted in Jeremiah 25:11, 12 and Jeremiah 29:10. However, many Old Testament symbols 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."[1] Indeed, the New Testament is the inspired interpreter of the Old Testament.

Inspired by the Holy Spirit, some prophets recorded things that they themselves did not fully understand. Sometimes, later prophets understood the meaning of ancient prophecies better than those who first received the prophecies (1 Pet. 1:10–12). Discerning the same Spirit behind each biblical author leads us to interpret the Bible as a connected whole, not as a collection of disjointed messages. Each book of the Bible provides a unique contribution to a single narrative of God loving us and doing everything possible to save all who will cooperate with Him.

Questions to consider:

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

Journal your responses and a personal prayer to God at the bottom of the previous page.

1 Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages,* vol. 2 (1958), 104.

It's important to correctly understand and apply Ellen G. White's writings. Here are a few guidelines:

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 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."[1] The same is true regarding her writings.

Second, consider the context of what you read. People have often based their understanding of Ellen White's writings on an isolated statement or paragraph removed from its original historical and literary context. Ellen White wrote that "time and place must be considered."[2] This unfortunate practice of ignoring context has caused, and continues to cause, no end of trouble for some church members.

Third, focus on principles. What's the main point (or points) that Ellen was emphasizing in a particular passage? For example, in 1894, Ellen wrote to church members in Battle Creek, Michigan, condemning the purchase of bicycles.[3] The principle that Ellen was seeking to encourage was proper stewardship of God-given resources, such as money, because bicycles were very expensive back then.

Fourth, study everything Ellen White wrote on a particular topic. Examine obscure statements in the context of her general teachings on a subject. During her lifetime, Ellen 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."[4]

Finally, make sure Ellen White truly said it. Numerous statements are 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's found, we can examine it using the correct principles.

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

To discover more, visit www.WhiteEstate.org/ABSG/8.

1 Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons* (1900), 112.
2 Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages,* vol 1. (1958), 57.
3 See Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church,* vol. 8 (1904), 50–53.
4 Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages,* vol 1. (1958), 44.

inQuire

As we journey through this study, it's important to engage deeply with the material and reflect on its implications for our faith and daily lives. In your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group), use the outline of questions below to lead a thoughtful discussion based on this week's main passage and supporting verses.

Help to understand:

1. Why did the visitor from Ethiopia need someone to help him understand the meaning of Isaiah's prophecy? Acts 8:26–35

2. What resulted from this Bible study? Acts 8:36–40

3. How did Jesus help His disciples understand the meaning of the scriptures? Luke 24:25–27, 44, 45

Personal reflection: *How have others helped you to understand the Bible? How are you helping others to better understand the Bible?*

The importance of proper interpretation:

1. How did Jesus acknowledge the need to rightly interpret the meaning of Scripture? Luke 10:26

2. In the grand scheme of the great controversy, how does Satan constantly try to lead people to misinterpret Scripture? Matt. 4:5–7

3. What are the dangers of private interpretation and twisting the meaning of Scripture? 2 Pet. 1:20; 3:16

4. Why should we pray that God gives us a good understanding of truth? Ps. 119:125; Dan. 9:13

Personal reflection: *How can you be safe from the deceptions of people who misuse Scripture?*

Principles for interpretation:

1. Why is it important to first look at the immediate context to understand the proper interpretation of a passage? Consider the example of Dan. 2:31–45.

2. How do some books of the Bible help interpret other books of the Bible? Consider the example of 2 Chron. 36:20–23.

Personal reflection: *What other principles can help us properly interpret the Bible?*

Key takeaways to remember:

- God needs us to explain the Bible to people who could never understand without help.
- Satan tries to get people to misinterpret Scripture so he can lead them astray.
- The Bible is a unified whole, and it interprets itself.