

FACE TO FACE

by David Birkenstock

Psalm 42:1-4 (RSV): “As a hart longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul for thee, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God? My tears have been my food day and night, while men say to me continually, ‘Where is your God?’ These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I went with the throng, and led them in procession to the house of God, with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival.”

INTRODUCTION

From the very beginning, creation was filled with sound, and every possible means of communication. In His desire to communicate with His children, God met them in the cool of the day to educate and guide them. He had placed Adam and Eve in a splendid garden and declared that all was good. “The book of nature, which spread its living lessons before them, afforded an exhaustless source of instruction and delight. On every leaf of the forest and stone of the mountains, in every shining star, in earth and sea and sky, God's name was written. With both the animate and the inanimate creation—with leaf and flower and tree, and with every living creature, from the leviathan of the waters to the mote in the sunbeam—the dwellers in Eden held converse, gathering from each the secrets of its life” (*Education*, p. 21). God, who created human beings in His image, loved to communicate with them and to share with them the wonders of creation.

Today we find that animals, insects, and all living creatures have ways to communicate. The dancing bee indicating to his fellow workers where the nectar can be found; a young bird's song that is learned from his parents; all of nature is abuzz with the sounds, smells and colors of communication. The herring gull, for example, communicates with its hungry chick by the red spot on its beak, and in response the chick tries to peck at the red spot, thus causing the mother gull to regurgitate food for it. Communication is indeed the common bond that holds all nature together.

Karl Jaspers, the German philosopher, wrote, “Man's supreme achievement in the world is communication from personality to personality” (*The Way to Wisdom*). All our successes in our careers, family, friendships, and companionships depend on communication. The fact is that we need contact with others, want contact with other people, and must have contact with fellow human beings if we are to become fully human. We have an inborn need to be in contact with other people and to communicate with them.

One of the most distinctive aspects of being alive is our potential for joy, fun, excitement, caring, and showing warmth; and this is only possible through communication. Just imagine what life would be like if we suddenly lost all the inventions that have to do with communication: the written word, newspapers, radio, TV, faxes, telephones, cell phones, the internet. Without communication our world would grind to a halt! Communication is vital for human existence, and if communication is so vital to us, how important it must be to God. God's preferred means of communication is face to face; this is the way God instituted His initial communication with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. "Our heavenly Father personally directed their education" (*Education*, p. 21)—it was that important to Him! So it was that God met them in the cool of the evening and educated them in all the secrets of the created world. What a joy and delight that must have been, to hold face-to-face communion with God! Ellen White reminds us of how heaven viewed this matter: "All heaven took a deep and joyful interest in the creation of the world and of man. Human beings were a new and distinct order. They were made 'in the image of God,' and it was the Creator's design that they should populate the earth" (*Review and Herald*, February 11, 1902).

Adam and Eve were the rulers of the Garden. Adam had been crowned king in Eden and was given dominion over everything that God had created (*God's Amazing Grace*, p. 40). For Adam to be the king of this perfect domain, God had to instruct him in what was expected of him in caring for the garden and all the animals that God had created. Although angels were also sent to instruct him, it was God himself who taught Adam what he needed to know. Adam and Eve had to learn how to care for the garden, and as they worked they learned the secrets of the plants and flowers. There was perfect harmony on earth, and God was very pleased with His creation; in fact, He pronounced it very good. (Gen. 1:31). Then came sin, and the perfect harmony was lost—including the face-to-face communion with their Creator.

COMMUNICATION AND THE FALL

God's desire to guide and save us is so strong that He designed a way to communicate His plans to us after sin entered the picture. Amos 3:7 tells us, "Surely the Lord God does nothing, unless He reveals His secret to His servants the prophets." We have the assurance that God will make His plans for the affairs of this world known to us, and therefore we need not fear the future.

The purpose of this sermon is to explore how God continued to communicate with humanity and how that in the planning and providence of God the time will come when the perfect mode of face-to-face communication will again be restored.

The entrance of sin brought separation between God and His children; no longer could there be face-to-face communion. As Isaiah 59:2 reminds us, "Your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear." Sin is the great separator between people and between us and God. This was a crisis moment in the history of the world, and we need to take a closer look at how God solved this problem. Along with the sentence that God pronounced over mankind because of sin came also the promise that a Savior would come and restore us to our rightful place in the universe. This promise of hope implied

that God would continue to communicate with mankind on a different level. Time revealed how he would do this. God would communicate with us through a Mediator, Jesus Christ. Christ was now Jacob's ladder, bringing heaven and earth together. Through a system of worship and sacrifices, God would teach fallen human beings that a Substitute would take their place. God would communicate with us through the Substitute and the angels. No longer would He speak to us face to face but through Christ and His angels, His Spirit, and His chosen servants. (See passages below: CC 20, CON20, CON21, GC v1, PP 184.)

COMMUNICATION DURING PATRIARCHAL TIMES

During the time of the Patriarchs, God continued to speak to humanity through the system of sacrifices He instituted; He also sent His Son and His angels to be His messengers and spoke directly to His people. God now called certain people to be His voice in the world. After Adam and Eve left the garden they started to see the results and effects of sin, not only in nature but also in their own family. Despite even the powerful ministry of Enoch, people became progressively more wicked until God decided to destroy the earth by water. Before bringing this destruction on the world, He called Noah to be His spokesman and preacher for 120 years! Evil had made such inroads into their lives that God thought it best to destroy humanity and all their works and to start anew with the family of Noah.

God's call to Abram demonstrated a new strategy in His communication with His fallen creatures. He not only called a man, but He promised him descendants and gave him the prospect of being the father of a great nation. This new nation would evangelize others and keep alive God's purposes in the world. Now it was no longer just a single leader or person that was called to be God's mouthpiece, but an entire nation was to do His bidding (Gen. 12:1-3). Thereby God illustrated His will for all people, namely that they should be a blessing in the world where they are (Gen. 12:2).

As this nation of faith grew, God chose to speak to His people in various ways. He spoke to Joseph through dreams, to the High Priest by means of the Urim and Thummim, and then through visions to the prophets who were called to be God's spokespersons. During the time of the Judges the Lord continued to speak through the leaders, and especially through His messengers, including people like Deborah, Samuel, and others. After settling in the Promised Land, the people desired to be ruled by a king like the nations around them; it was then that the role of prophets came into greater prominence.

Why did God continue to care and try to communicate with His people despite their rebellion and sinfulness? In 2 Chronicles 36:15 we are given an insight into how God felt about His people: "He had compassion on His people and on His dwelling place."

Prophets are not only spokesmen for God but are also known as the foretellers of things to come. During the time of the kings the prophets played a very important role in the affairs of the nation. In the days of the prophet Samuel we hear of the Schools of the Prophets—special schools that trained the nation's spiritual leaders. These prophets had the responsibility of keeping the kings and the royal family on track, even having to

rebuke kings who were not living in harmony with God's requirements for the nation. It is from this time that we come across the well known text from 2 Chronicles 20:20, when King Jehoshaphat said to the people, "Believe in the Lord your God, and you shall be established; believe His prophets, and you shall prosper."

The work of the prophet was two-fold: to receive the Lord's messages, and to deliver them. The Hebrew language has three words for the word "prophet: "chozeh" which means seer, akin to seeing or vision. The second word is "nabi" which is most frequently used for prophet and means "one who speaks for God." The third word is "roeh" which is also translated as a seer, or one who discerns God's will, one who receives visions in guiding the nation. The New Testament Greek word is "prophetes" which means one who speaks forth. God used various methods to transmit His message to the prophet, and the prophet was to interpret and transmit the message to the people.

By the time the nation was being established there were already some criteria for testing a prophet. False prophets have often plagued the people of God. Moses gave one of the first criteria of a true prophet: The predictions a prophet makes should come to pass, otherwise the Lord has not spoken (Deut. 18:21, 22). (The Bible does allow, however, for some prophecies to be conditional. These may not be fulfilled if the conditions are not met or the situation has changed; see Jer. 18:7-10 and the Book of Jonah.) Another important criterion is that the prophet teaches truth and obedience, as noted by Moses in Deuteronomy 13:1-4. A prophet does not deny truth previously given by another prophet but teaches obedience to God and His will. A similar thought is given in Isaiah 8:20: genuine prophets speak in harmony with the word and revealed will of God. With the passage of time it became very clear that a prophet also had to be a man or woman of God, whose life was in harmony with his or her beliefs and thus their lives would produce fruit in line with their profession (Matt. 7:15-23).

In compassion for His people, God reveals Himself during periods of crisis. The appearance of prophets is often linked with a major crisis in the history of the world. Think of the flood, before which God sent Noah to warn the world of the impending doom. Think of Israel in bondage in Egypt, to whom God sent Moses to take them to the Promised Land. Think of the severe oppression during the time of the Judges, and people such as Deborah and later Samuel who were sent to bring relief and courage to the people. Think of the periods of dark apostasy during the reign of the kings of Israel, when God sent men like Elijah to save the nation. Think of the time of national decline, and God's grace in sending Isaiah and Jeremiah to encourage the people. During their captivity we find Daniel and Ezekiel, who brought messages of courage to the remnant.

It is clear from Scripture that God used prophets and that His choice of spokesperson was not limited by gender or genealogy, as in the choice of priests and the High Priest; but God used both men and women to be His spokespersons. In times of crisis for the nation of Israel God sent His prophets to give guidance, to rebuke, and to lead the nation. At some of these crucial points God had a number of prophets working to guide the people, but after the captivity of Israel there came a period of nearly 500 years when the prophetic office was silent. When the time was ripe in the history of Israel and in the

history of the world, God sent the greatest of the prophets in the person of His Son with the true messages about God (Heb. 1:2).

TEACHING IN THE EARLY CHRISTIAN CHURCH

The prophetic voice was heard again when the time had come for the Messiah to be born and the Christian church to be established. We see the prophetic voice in the amazing work of John the Baptist who alerted the people of the coming Messiah, finally baptized Him, and pointed Him out to the people as the Lamb of God (John 1:36). John was God's means of communicating hope to His people and calling them to repentance. The ministries of both John and Jesus were accompanied by signs and miracles, confirming their messages in the minds of a skeptical Jewish nation.

Jesus gave His message into the hands of a special community. This community, made up of apostles, leaders and believers, were to go into the whole world. It was up to them, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to tell the world about the price that was paid for their redemption, and that salvation was now freely available to all humanity. They were to voice God's intention of bringing heaven and earth together again after a final showdown between Good and Evil. At the Cross, Satan knew he was a defeated foe, but he would continue trying to deceive the world into following him in opposition to God. Jesus, by His life and ministry, had given the greatest revelation of who God is; He was indeed the greatest of the prophets (Heb. 1:2, 3).

God raised up great and mighty prophets in the ministry of Paul, Peter, John, and many other leaders. They clearly taught that the prophetic gift was to continue to the end of time in the church. In His compassion and care for His church, God would again raise up prophets to lead the church in time of crisis. The apostle Paul expected the prophetic gift to be with God's people till the end of time, and so in his writings he admonished the Corinthian church not to come short in any gift (1 Cor. 1:7). Paul assured the Galatians that the fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22) were for the Christian, and that besides this God gives the gifts of the Spirit to various ones whom He selects (1 Cor. 12:11), for the blessing of the church. In looking down the passage of time, Jesus expected the prophetic gift to continue to the end of time, for He warned the end-time church to beware of false prophets (Matt. 24:24). A warning against false prophets implies that there should also be genuine prophets, from whom the false ones must be distinguished, or else the warning would be against *any* prophets. Therefore we need to heed carefully the words of Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5:20, "Do not despise prophecies."

It is clear that God's last church on earth would have the prophetic gift. In fact, this gift would be one of the marks of the remnant church as recorded in Revelation 12:17 and Revelation 19:10. The disciples on the road to Emmaus were dismayed as they walked in the shadow of the crucifixion, thinking all was lost. Then Jesus came near and opened their minds to the events of their day and brought them hope and comfort. In a similar way, after the confusion and despair following the October 22 disappointment of 1844, God came close to His people by means of the prophetic gift, to encourage them, warn them of what was coming, and to prepare a people to meet their God.

SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISTS AND THE PROPHETIC GIFT

The Seventh-day Adventist Church that arose after the great disappointment of October 22, 1844, came to believe strongly in the role and place of the prophetic gift in the church. The great disappointment shattered the faith of many who had believed that Christ would return in October of that year. Many gave up their faith. Various groups emerged from the disappointment, all seeking to find a way through the events that had so devastated them. One of these groups became the forerunners of the Seventh-day Adventist church. It was to this group that Ellen Gould Harmon, at the age of 17, revealed what God had shown her.

She was sickly, shy, and by no means one to promote herself, but she had a message for the people that God had shown her in vision. She saw herself as the weakest of the weak and a handmaiden of the Lord. She never made a claim for herself to the prophetic office but saw her role as a lesser light leading others to the Word of God and to the Savior. Through His communication with this shy teenager, who encouraged the people to restudy the Bible and pray for God's revelation of the truth, God once again came close to His people. Perplexity and gloom changed to hope and courage. Soon these early Adventists were sharing their joy and hope in the present truth with the entire world.

Young Ellen had to contend with the prevailing sentiment among Millerite leaders that all charismatic phenomena, such as visions and trances, were to be rejected (Douglass, *Messenger of the Lord*, p 39). Equally troubling were the widening divisions and fearsome fanaticisms within the Millerite movement after the disappointment (ibid.). Ellen was a frail and sickly teenager who could barely speak above a whisper. Yet she was given a vision in December, 1844, which she was told to share with early believers. In time, because of her humble, unswerving fidelity to God's will for her to be His messenger, she became the rallying point for earnest Bible students who wanted to know what was right and wrong about the 1844 disappointment. From this humble beginning came the formation of the Seventh-day Adventist church in the years 1860-1863.

The pioneers of the church were very watchful for anything that would indicate that these manifestations of the prophetic gift were not genuine. Ellen Harmon was therefore subjected to rigorous tests by doctors, ministers, and other leaders; however, she passed the biblical tests of a genuine prophet with flying colors, and her experience corresponded to the Bible's descriptions of the prophets' physical condition in vision. There are numerous eyewitness accounts of those who observed her and became convinced that she was a genuine spokesperson for God. The guidance she gave in the early days of the church, confirming the doctrinal positions of the church, and also her personal work in the church gave credence to her words and testimony. She married James White, a minister, in 1846, and therefore became known to members of the church as Ellen G White.

Faced with this manifestation of the Spirit of prophecy in the church, the church had to develop an understanding of the role of spiritual gifts in the church, especially that of the Spirit of prophecy. The early believers did so with much prayerful searching of

Scripture, and their findings have remained largely unchanged as one of the fundamental beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist church. This belief recognizes the biblical view of the Spirit of prophecy in the church and how the gift was manifested through the life and work of Ellen G. White and her writings. For seventy years her ministry and writings guided the church, and today, 93 years after her death, her writings still continue to point God's church to the Bible and the Savior that it presents, the Lord Jesus Christ.

CONCLUSION

In the history of mankind God has revealed Himself through the prophetic gift in times of great crisis, in times of need, in times when God had something special to share with humanity. This type of communication through the prophets was not limited to just some biblical periods of history but was manifested throughout human history. Though there were periods when the prophetic voice was silent and we have little knowledge of what happened during these periods, God's Word assures us in Amos 3:7 that God will do nothing in our world without first revealing it to His prophets. With every new initiative, every new epoch in sacred history, God informs us of His intentions for the future.

After giving His Son to pay the price on the cross for our salvation, God will not abandon us in these last days, but will continue to seek and to save all who accept Jesus and come into harmony with Him. With the Bible writers we also exclaim, "Maranatha! Come Lord Jesus, Come!" Come and restore the original mode of communication with all mankind—face to face!

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Unless otherwise noted, Bible quotations are from the New King James Version.

APPENDIX. – ELLEN G. WHITE QUOTATIONS

1. CHRIST THE NEW WAY OF COMMUNICATION BETWEEN MAN AND GOD

{CC 20} After the fall Christ became Adam's instructor. He acted in God's stead toward humanity, saving the race from immediate death. He took upon him the office of mediator. Adam and Eve were given a probation in which to return to their allegiance, and in this plan all their posterity were embraced.

Without the atonement of the Son of God there could have been no communication of blessing or salvation from God to man. God was jealous for the honor of His law. The transgression of that law had caused a fearful separation between God and man. To Adam in his innocence was granted communion, direct, free, and happy,

with his Maker. After his transgression, God would communicate to man only through Christ and angels. (*Conflict and Courage*, p. 20)

2. MAN'S SIN—IMPOSSIBILITY OF COMMUNION WITH GOD

{Con 20} The holy and infinite God, who dwelleth in light unapproachable, could no longer talk with man. No communication could now exist directly between man and his Maker.

God forbears, for a time, the full execution of the sentence of death pronounced upon man. Satan flattered himself that he had forever broken the link between heaven and earth. But in this he was greatly mistaken and disappointed. The Father had given the world into the hands of His Son for Him to redeem from the curse and the disgrace of Adam's failure and fall. Through Christ alone can man now find access to God. And through Christ alone will the Lord hold communication with man. (*Confrontation*, p. 20)

3. MAN SAVED BY THE SACRIFICIAL SYSTEM

{Con 21} Fallen man, because of his guilt, could no longer come directly before God with his supplications; for his transgression of the divine law had placed an impassable barrier between the holy God and the transgressor. But a plan was devised that the sentence of death should rest upon a Substitute. In the plan of redemption there must be the shedding of blood, for death must come in consequence of man's sin. The beasts for sacrificial offerings were to prefigure Christ. In the slain victim, man was to see the fulfillment for the time being of God's word, "Thou shalt surely die." And the flowing of the blood from the victim would also signify an atonement. There was no virtue in the blood of animals; but the shedding of the blood of beasts was to point forward to a Redeemer who would one day come to the world and die for the sins of men. And thus Christ would fully vindicate His Father's law. (*Confrontation*, pp. 21, 22)

4. AFTER ENTRANCE OF SIN GOD COMMUNICATES BY HOLY SPIRIT

{GC v} Before the entrance of sin, Adam enjoyed open communion with his Maker; but since man separated himself from God by transgression, the human race has been cut off from this high privilege. By the plan of redemption, however, a way has been opened whereby the inhabitants of the earth may still have connection with heaven. God has communicated with men by His Spirit, and divine light has been imparted to the world by revelations to His chosen servants. "Holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost." 2 Peter 1:21. (*The Great Controversy*, Introduction, p. v)

5. JESUS AS MEDIATOR AND THE LADDER BETWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH

{PP 184} Up to the time of man's rebellion against the government of God, there had been free communion between God and man. But the sin of Adam and Eve separated earth from heaven, so that man could not have communion with his Maker. Yet the world was not left in solitary hopelessness. The ladder represents Jesus, the appointed medium of communication. Had He not with His own merits bridged the gulf that sin had made, the ministering angels could have held no communion with fallen man. Christ connects man in his weakness and helplessness with the source of infinite power. (*Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 184)

6. COMMUNION WAS TO BE FOREVER.

Face-to-face, heart-to-heart communion with his Maker was his high privilege. Had he remained loyal to God, all this would have been his forever. Throughout eternal ages he would have continued to gain new treasures of knowledge, to discover fresh springs of happiness, and to obtain clearer and yet clearer conceptions of the wisdom, the power, and the love of God. More and more fully would he have fulfilled the object of his creation, more and more fully have reflected the Creator's glory. (*Education*, p. 15)

7. GOD COMMUNICATED THROUGH CHRIST—INCARNATION IN CHRIST

Ever since Adam's sin, the human race had been cut off from direct communion with God; the communication between heaven and earth had been through Christ; but now that Jesus had come "in the likeness of sinful flesh" (Romans 8:3), the Father Himself spoke. He had before communicated with humanity *through* Christ; now He communicated with humanity *in* Christ. Satan had hoped that God's abhorrence of evil would bring an eternal separation between heaven and earth. But now it was manifest that the connection between God and man had been restored. (*The Desire of Ages*, p. 116)

8. IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATION

Power to Communicate--The extent of a Christian's usefulness is measured by his power to communicate that which he has received, and which has become experience to him. Education falls short if students do not obtain a knowledge of how to use the faculty of speech, and how to use to the best advantage the education they have obtained. The youth are to commence when young to learn the proper manner of speech.--Ms 74, 1897. (*The Voice in Speech and Song*, p. 43)

9. THE WORD A CHANNEL OF COMMUNICATION WITH GOD.

The Word of God is a channel of communication with the living God. He who feeds upon the Word will become fruitful in all good works. He . . . will be the discoverer of rich mines of truth which he must work to find the hidden treasure. When [he is] surrounded with temptations, the Holy Spirit will bring to his mind the very words with which to meet the temptation at the very moment when they are most needed, and he can use them effectually. (*The Faith I Live By*, p. 8)