

Lesson 119

400 Years of Waiting

God prepares the world for Jesus.

Overview

Lesson Focus

Four hundred years would pass before Malachi's prophecy was fulfilled. During these "silent years," God did not speak to his people through prophets, but he was sovereignly directing events to prepare the world for the coming of Jesus. The Greek and Roman empires significantly influenced the political and cultural climate of Israel, leading to the time of Jesus' arrival.

Key Passages

Daniel 8:20–24; Mark 7:1–8

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Recognize God's role in the progression of history leading to the time of Christ.
- Explain the differences between the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Memory Verse

Jeremiah 33:7–8 I will restore the fortunes of Judah and the fortunes of Israel, and rebuild them as they were at first. I will cleanse them from all the guilt of their sin against me, and I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me.

Prepare to Share

Scriptural Background

Prepare to teach by preparing your heart. Read the key passages for this lesson along with this background.

Our chronological journey has brought us to the end of the Old Testament, but you may be surprised to find that we are not quite ready for the New Testament. After Malachi, over 400 years passed before the beginning events of the Gospels. This intertestamental period is often referred to as the 400 silent years because no prophet was on the earth, speaking on behalf of God. Amos may have been speaking of this time when he told of a coming famine, "not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord" (Amos 8:11).

During this time, God was only speaking through what had already been recorded by the previous writers of the Old Testament scriptures, but those writings contained plenty for the Israelites to consider until the coming of the Messiah. Daniel had seen visions of kingdoms that would rise and fall after the

Babylonian Empire began to crumble. You may recall Nebuchadnezzar's dream from Daniel chapter 2. He saw a statue made of various metals, which Daniel interpreted as successive kingdoms. Daniel's vision of the four beasts (chapter 7) represents the same progression of empires as chapter 2. We can now identify these empires as that of Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome.

In chapter 8, Daniel records a vision of a ram and a goat, revealed to represent Medo-Persia and Greece. Greece would be divided into four kingdoms. We recognize this as referring to Alexander the Great and the territories divided between his generals following his death. Daniel offers additional details in chapter 11, which explains a great rivalry between the kingdom of the south and the kingdom of the north. This chapter seems to describe the conflicts of the Hellenistic (Greek) dynasties.

The details in Daniel are so specific and match so closely with the history of the Middle East during the first four centuries BC that some scholars have suggested that the book was written during the Maccabean revolt in order to encourage the Jews. Of course, we know that is false, because the Bible is the divinely inspired Word of God. Daniel claims to be the author and gives dates corresponding with the exilic period, and Jesus recognized Daniel as the author (Matthew 24:15). God spoke through prophets, often foretelling events, so it is no surprise that God used Daniel to speak about the future.

God had not only prepared his people for the political climate and the conflict they would face during this so-called silent period, but he had also given them much insight into the promised Messiah. It had been about 3,600 years since God first promised a Savior (Genesis 3:15) to Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. It had been about 1,500 years since God made his covenant with Abraham. From the beginning, God has been orchestrating the events of history so that the Messiah would come into the world at the perfect time. Throughout the entire Old Testament, we have been looking forward to the coming of the Messiah. In his first epistle, Peter makes it clear that the prophets of old were studying and prophesying about the coming of Christ.

Historical/Apologetics Background

Although God was not speaking through prophets at this time, there was much going on in the world according to God's sovereign direction. The Persian Empire fell to Alexander the Great, who ruled the Greeks (circa 336 BC). When Alexander died, four of his generals divided the empire. Ptolemy solidified his hold of North Africa and southern Syria, including Judah. During this time, the Jews were free to practice their religion under the supervision of the Ptolemaic rulers.

Another of Alexander's generals, Seleucus, reigned in Syria. Eventually, Jerusalem fell under Seleucid control. One of the Seleucid kings, Antiochus Epiphanies, ransacked Jerusalem in 167 BC, setting up a statue of Zeus in the temple and offering pigs as a sacrifice on the altar. In response, a group of zealous Jews rebelled against the Greeks. This revolt came to be known as the Maccabean Revolt under the leadership of Judas Maccabaeus. This group retook Jerusalem, though greatly outnumbered, and purified the temple. The Jewish feast of Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights, was celebrated and is commemorated

to this day. The Jews remained relatively independent until 64 BC, when the Romans took Jerusalem. It was under this government that the New Testament opens.

Though there was no inspired writing during this period, there are historical records. In the Apocrypha, the books of 1 and 2 Maccabees record the events of the revolt, but this is not Scripture. In fact, at several points in 1 Maccabees, the writer makes it clear that there were no prophets in Israel at the time. While these books can shed some light on select historical events, they are not infallible and offer no light to guide our path as do the true and sure words of Scripture.

This was a tumultuous period of history, and much of what occurred was significant for developing the context into which Christ would be born. The Greek Empire united the world, spreading a common language and culture. It was due to the Greek love of scholarship that the Septuagint was compiled, gathering the Hebrew scriptures and translating them into Greek. It was also in response to Hellenization, among other factors, that the Jewish sects arose as rival parties. Under Roman influence, great roads and infrastructure were built, paving the way for the spread of the church. It was during this time that Herod rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem.

For 400 years, the Jews waited with no new revelation from God, enduring great conflict and cultural tension. "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons" (Galatians 4:4–5).

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