

The Silent Years
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Larry Kroon: We've had as a study project this year, a study goal on Sunday mornings, to work our way through the story of God's redemptive grace from the beginning, Genesis, all the way to the end in the book of Revelation. When you do that there's an odd spot in that story where everything, at least in terms of the Biblical account, goes silent; and that's the four hundred years before the end...between the end of the Old Testament and the start of the New Testament. The people of Israel have had grand promises of a coming Messiah who will not only establish a kingdom, but will renew men's hearts. And as the Old Testament comes to an end those promises have been made but the Messiah hasn't come. And things still are not right in Israel. Men's hearts have not changed, and God has gone silent. The prophets no longer speak.

Those four hundred years...a lot of Christians aren't sure what happened during that time. And as we go through the story we decided we're gonna take one Sunday just to talk about those four hundred silent years. And so what we did is we went to Jon Spiegel. Jon, you can come right on up here and take your place. Jon is a trained theologian and researcher whose specialty is in history. And periodically we have Jon come in and take us into areas that we're not sure about, and give us information. And Jon's gonna be taking us through this time. He's also going on Wednesday nights he's taking my men's study through a historical theological study of Mormonism, the Muslim faith, Islam, and Jehovah's Witness, in a nine-week series. So we keep Jon busy around here. And those of you who have watched Jon through the years, I think you will notice there has been a change. He now is married and wears pants that have a crease in them. Having said that, Jon...

Jon Spiegel: Alright, thank you very much, Larry.

Four hundred years...that's a long, long time, four hundred years. If you go back four hundred years in our own history you would go back to a wilderness. The entire North America was a wilderness. Four hundred years ago if you were in England you would probably be waiting in anticipation for a new promised best-seller, the King James Version of the Bible. Four hundred years ago you would have had people gathering together, waiting for the newest release of William Shakespeare's plays. Four hundred years is a long, long time. Four hundred years ago the colony of Jamestown was struggling to survive, and it would be another ten years before the Pilgrims would even set foot on Plymouth Rock. It was a long time, four hundred years. But that is the time span between the final pages of the Old Testament and the first chapters of the New Testament. And a lot can happen during that time, and a lot did happen in Jerusalem. And we're gonna traverse that time period, from the last words of the Old Testament to the first words of the New Testament, and we've got a lot of ground to cover, and we're gonna have to cover it fast.

It's a period of time that is commonly referred to as the Silent Years, for there was no official revelation, no official prophet, at this time. The last of the Old Testament prophets, Malachi, had put down his pen; and there would not be another prophet until John the Baptist arises outside of the city of Jerusalem. The time period can be summed up with the words of Psalm 74, which says

We are given no miraculous signs; no prophets are left, and none of us knows how long this will be.

It's a time period of anticipation; it's a time period of nervousness.

There are four nations that we'll look at and categorize in this time period, four groups of people that had an impact on Jerusalem. The first will be the Persian Empire. The Persians had defeated the Babylonians and had taken all they had and more. And the Persian Empire would be the first empire to be described as a super power. And under this super power many of the Jewish people who had been living in exile were now allowed to return to Jerusalem. Under the authority of the Persian king, Cyrus the Great, they were permitted to rebuild their temple, as had been recorded in the Old Testament book of Ezra. When they rebuilt it there was mixed feelings, because many of the older people looked up at this new temple that was being built and it wasn't nearly as grand as the one that they remembered when they were children.

The Persian Empire was coming to its last days. And up to the northwest, up above Greece, a young man was gathering his father's army together and they were ready to head east in search of revenge. Alexander the Great would sweep across Asia and the Middle East, pursuing and punishing the Persians for invading Greece years before. Alexander was a brilliant general, and his men followed him as he chased the Persian king, Darius, across the empire. If a city closed its doors to him he would tear down its walls. But quite often, when he came to a city they would open the doors and welcome him...because they knew what he could do.

The high priest of Jerusalem was said to have been a godly man by the name of Jeddua. And Jeddua is said to have taken the sacred writings, the scrolls of Daniel the prophet, and accompanied by a group of other priests went outside the city to meet with Alexander. And there he opened up the scrolls and showed Alexander the prophecies of a king that would defeat the Persians. Alexander may have conquered cities, but he himself sometimes could be easily subdued by flattery. He was very tolerant of the Jewish faith and the people and their culture. And during his reign the Jews of Jerusalem were able to practice their faith unhindered.

Alexander died at a young age—thirty-three; and when he died he left an empire that was huge and massive, but it was not well consolidated. And it would be divided among his leading generals. And those generals would start to fight amongst each other. The two that matter to us here are Ptolemy, who took Egypt and northern Africa, and the other was Seleucus, who took the northern areas of Syria. And as far as the people of Jerusalem were concerned, he could refer to them as the northern kingdom and the southern kingdom. And Jerusalem was stuck right in the middle.

For the next one hundred years Jerusalem would be caught in a meat grinder of unending conflicts between the kingdom of the north and the kingdom of the south. The book of Daniel describes much of this conflict in prophetic terms in chapter 11. And, in fact, the book of Daniel is a great book to read when looking at this period because it foretells so much of what is going on.

The kingdom of the north would eventually win out and gain complete control of Jerusalem. In the year 175 BC a king would come to power that would be one of the most vicious and violent persecutors of the Jews. In fact, he is referred to often as a model of the anti-Christ, since he fulfills so many of the predictions of Daniel. And Daniel refers to him as 'a contemptible person and a vile king.' The man is remembered under the name of Antiochus Epiphanes. And his name, Antiochus Epiphanes, means (which he humbly bestowed on himself) 'Antiochus the manifestation of God'. His soldiers didn't like him very well, and they made a play on words behind his back. And they called him 'Antiochus Epimanes', which means 'Antiochus the madman'.

As to what was going on inside the city walls of Jerusalem, there was division. There were a number of Jews who wanted to adopt the Greek culture and the Greek way of life. They were called Hellenists, and they wanted to liberalize the laws of Moses. There were those who opposed this, kind of like Hebrew nationalists, who wanted to preserve everything according to the Mosaic order. They refused...they resisted all the foreign influenced that were coming in, disrupting the Jewish ways.

Now, there was still war going on between the north and the south; and the king of the north, Antiochus, was afraid that the Jews of Jerusalem would join forces with the king of the south. He was probably afraid of this because the Greeks back in those days were convinced that the Jews were ethnically related to the Egyptians. In order to stop this, he wanted to stop them from being Jewish. So he declared war on their faith. He attacked the city, and in three days some estimate over forty thousand people were slaughtered. He entered the Jewish temple; and he entered into the Holy of Holies where he destroyed the scrolls, the Laws of Moses. And to the absolute horror of the people Antiochus took a pig and offered a pig on the altar. The pig is an unclean animal in Jewish tradition, and it was appalling that he would do this. And then, if that was not enough, he took that pig, boiled it in a pot, and took the soup...the broth...and he had his men spray that all over the interior of the temple, desecrating the entire temple. This event would give rise to what is known as the Maccabean revolt. When Antiochus left Jerusalem he left behind a volcano prepared to erupt. And they did. Judas Maccabbeus...his name, Maccabbeus, means 'the Hammer'...Judas 'the Hammer', and his father and brothers, led a revolt. And the people of Jerusalem followed them. There was a series of skirmishes, guerrilla warfare, that would eventually overthrow the power of the Syrian kings. And they would take Jerusalem back, cleansing the temple. The day they cleansed the temple was named the "Day of Dedication", and it is still celebrated among Jewish communities today as Hanukkah. They had gained religious freedom, but the fighting was not over. It would not be until the year 143 BC that Jerusalem would have not only religious freedom but also political independence as well. It was a tremendous, tremendous story, the event that happened.

Political independence does not mean political rest. And eighty years later, withing the city, two brothers would struggle for power. One brother, Hyrcanus, having served as high priest and acting as civil leader; the other, Aristobulus, wanted the control for himself. They struggled amongst each other and they could not work it out. But on the horizon the Roman general, Pompey, was coming. The older brother went out to meet him and made a treaty with him. The younger brother, Aristobulus, did not. He may not have had the money to bribe a Roman general. But he decided on a different tactic—he would close and lock the gates of Jerusalem and he would hold off the Roman army. This led to a siege that lasted three months; and finally, when the Roman army burst through those gates, they went through the streets slaughtering people. Jerusalem was devastated. But it was also now part of the Roman republic that would soon be known as the Roman Empire.

In the year 37 the man known as Herod the Great would be proclaimed king of the Judea by the Romans. He would rule over Jerusalem for thirty-three years as a puppet king for the Empire. Herod was a powerful man, but a paranoid man as well. And he knew that he stood between a very powerful empire and a very dissatisfied people. He tried to please them both. He had an entire city built on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, and he named it Caesaria, which basically means 'Caesarville' or 'Caesartown'. And he was kissing up to the Empire, trying to win their favor. But he was paranoid. So he also built several fortresses just in case the Romans got dissatisfied with him and started looking for him. The best known was built on top of a high plateau named Masada.

Herod was not just concerned about the Romans...he was also afraid of the Jews themselves. He was a man who appeared to have lived in fear. One of his contemporaries stated that he would rather be one of Herod's dogs rather than one of Herod's family. And this was said because Herod's paranoia reached out even into his own family when he had two of his sons executed because he was afraid; the rumors had spread that they wanted to take the crown from him. Fear had caused Herod to build fortresses against Rome; fear would also cause him to build a fortress within the city walls of Jerusalem itself, to protect him in case the Jews rebelled, in case there was an uprising of the people that he was governing.

To build the Romans he built a city. To please the Jews he built a temple, a grand temple on a massive scale. He built a temple that would outshine anything beyond their imagination. The temple court would cover the size of over twenty football fields. The building itself was made out of white marble. It was covered with gold all around. The Jewish historian, Josephus, would describe it from a distance, saying it looked like a snow-covered mountain in the city. It was fantastic. It was built in order to win the favor of the Jews.

When we read the New Testament you find the influence of all this, of all these nations in the New Testament. When we read in the gospels of the birth of Jesus Christ, we read of the magi, wise men from the east from the regions of Persia who came to see the newborn king. And it is just possible that they had been holding onto the same writings of Daniel that the Jews had, that foretold of the coming king.

From Alexander would come the Greek language. And the Greek language became the language of trade, the universal language of the Mediterranean. You could speak it anywhere and find people who understood you. Communications was better than it had ever been before in the history of the world. The books of the Old Testament had been translated from Hebrew into Greek, and this was done by the Jews living in Egypt. This would be the scriptures that the early church would read and get to know. If you were to take a walk through the city streets of Jerusalem you would see more influences from the Greek occupation. You would walk by a huge building, a gymnasium, and you would also walk by a theater right in the center of the city. The Greek influence left its mark.

And the Maccabean revolt left the heritage of hope and a desire for freedom. The people had tasted freedom, tasted liberty, and they wanted more...religious as well as political. The Maccabbeans were heroes for many of the Jews living in Jerusalem. Many of them who wanted political independence and freedom from the Roman rule would eventually be known as zealots in the New Testament.

The Romans brought with them an air of peace known as the Pax Romana, the peace of Rome. The civilized world around the Mediterranean Sea was held under one Empire; tremendous communications system, and they built a network of roads that were used by missionaries and travelers for centuries.

And then there was the fantastic new temple that was manned by over a thousand priests. Many of these priests were of a group known as the Sadducees. They were a very politically-motivated group, very aristocratic, and at times they were out of touch with the people in the streets. Which is why the Pharisees would become so popular, for they were more akin to the people who were the middle class and the lower class people. And they would teach from synagogues and houses on the streets. They were taking Jewish faith to the streets and local synagogues.

When reading the Bible, the Old and New Testaments, it's often easy to see God at work. He tells you...the Bible tells you 'God did this', 'God did that', 'the word of God came to this prophet', 'the word of God went to that prophet and told him such-and-such'. Scripture tells us what God was doing in the history of Israel. But the written record ends with the Old Testament, and the Jewish nation appeared to wander in a kind of wilderness, a wilderness of silence—four hundred years without an official word from God. A lot happened in those four hundred years. *“We are given no miraculous signs, no prophets are left, and none of us knows how long this will be.”* Four hundred years is a long time.

But even though there was not a direct word from God during that four hundred years, there was God's revelation before and after. Before the four hundred years there had been the words of Jeremiah, who said

“The time is coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel... I will put My law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be My people.”

There was a future expectation of a promise and hope. There were also the words of the prophets like Daniel, whose visions would reach through this time period, describing the nations that would come and go; words that, though they might not make sense at the time, they would spring to life as history unfolded. And they would reveal what God was doing, and that God was still there working in history, still watching over His people. These words had left their impact on the people of Jerusalem. For as they entered into what we call the first century, there was great anticipation among the Jews of the coming Messiah. They were looking, like the magi, for a coming king. There were differences of opinion on what this coming king would be like, but many were watching, waiting in anticipation in fulfillment of what the prophets had said.

In hindsight, the Apostle Paul would write “When the time had fully come...”

When the time had fully come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law.

And many of the people did not give up hope. They carried that promise of God with them.

What do we do in our short lives, our little history, when God seems silent? Look to the promises He has made, look to the words of scripture, remember the faithfulness of God in the past, in your own past experience, recall the stories and testimonies of friends who have recognized the grace of God in their own lives. Recall the stories and events of your own life when you've seen God's grace at work in your life. And remember to bring these promises and blessings with you as you go into your unknown future. There are times when we feel God is silent in our life. But God is not silent. He has spoken. He will speak. And in hindsight, we will see what He was doing.

Let's pray.

LORD God,

There are many times when people ask where You are, many times in our own lives when we wonder why You are silent...as Israel may have wondered why there was no word from You. Many times people have wondered how long, LORD. But thank You so much for the words of promise and hope that You have given us, and thank You for the anticipation of Your promises to us. I pray we keep these with us as we move on.

In Jesus' name, amen.