

Story of the NT

Introduction Part 3

Let's continue with the third, and final part of this Introduction lesson for The story of the New Testament. We're continuing on page nine.

These introductory lessons help us to understand the background of what was going on in history, what was going on theologically, what was going on culturally leading up to the time when Jesus would come. From the end of the Old Testament to the beginning of the New Testament, there were 400 years. These are referred to as the 400 silent years.

That does not mean God was not working. God was at work. He is always at work.

There just were no speaking and writing prophets at that time. As we continue with this lesson in particular, we'll see from a historical perspective and from a cultural perspective and a theological perspective, how God was at work preparing the way for Jesus to come at just the right time. Turn with me to the top of page 9.

You can see that we're going to look at the New Testament from a historical perspective. We're thinking of when and where did the events of the New Testament take place. We call this the intertestamental period.

It runs from about 433 BC to 5 BC. This continues from Nehemiah to the time of Christ. We see many of the events that take place during this time were prophesied by Daniel.

You can read Daniel chapters 2, 7, 8, 10 and 11 to get a feel for these events that were prophesied by Daniel. Remember just one example in Daniel chapter 2. King Nebuchadnezzar had a dream of a large statue and he needed someone to interpret the dream for him. Daniel was the one who told him what the dream was and then he interpreted it.

In that dream, there was a statue with multiple parts. Each of the parts represented a different kingdom that would come in the future. From history, we can look back and see that the current kingdom, or the head of the statue was the kingdom of Babylon.

It was followed by the kingdom of Persia, followed by the kingdom of Greece, followed by the kingdom of Rome. In the future there would be another kingdom. This kingdom was represented by the feet of the statue. The kingdom of the Antichrist will come 7 years before Jesus returns. There was a rock in Nebuchadnezzar's dream that crushed the feet of the statue. Jesus is the rock that will crush the kingdom of the Antichrist.

So, throughout the book of Daniel, Daniel is prophesying regarding these historical events that will take place. Many of them were fulfilled during this period from the end of the Old Testament until the start of the New Testament. It's important to understand the world into which the Lord Jesus Christ came.

There is a chart on this page that helps to understand some key events leading into this period. The exile of the Southern Kingdom of Judah began in 605 BC and it ends around 535 BC. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell the story during the return and restoration that took place. The prophets in that day were Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. The 400 silent years begin around 433 BC and continue until about 4 or 5 BC.

The gospel stories begin with John the Baptist breaking the silence and continuing through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. I do not want to focus in too much detail regarding the historical kingdoms during these 400 years. Instead, I want you to see how God was at work preparing the world for Jesus to come at just the right time.

The first Kingdom is Babylon. King Nebuchadnezzar was the primary king during that time. There's an emphasis on God actually working through the kingdom of Babylon to judge his people and bring them into exile. God brought them to a place of repentance to one day return to the promised land and continue the work that God had planned for building his kingdom.

Following Babylon, just as Daniel prophesied, the kingdom of Persia would rule next from 539 BC to 331 BC.

At the end of the Old Testament story, the Persians replaced the Babylonians as the major political power ruling over Judea. The Persians were more tolerant to the Jewish people. At the end of that time, King Cyrus made a proclamation allowing God's people to return to their land and rebuild the temple.

That was around 516 BC. The walls were completed around 444 BC. The Jewish leaders at the time of the return, were Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah, and the prophets were Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, and that's where the Old Testament story ends.

Beginning around 331 BC up until 143 BC was the kingdom of Greece. This was known as the Hellenistic age, another word for a Greek culture. Alexander the Great was the primary leader at that time.

Alexander unified his empire under the influence of the Greek culture. The Greek language became the lingua franca or the language of the people. God was preparing the culture with a common language for the gospel to be shared throughout the story of the New Testament.

Alexander's empire was divided into four parts following his death. There were two prominent leaders or dynasties. One had an Egyptian focus and the other was focused in Syria. The Egyptian dynasty was known as the Ptolemies, and the Syrian dynasty was known as the Seleucids. We see a glimpse of this in Daniel chapters 8 and 11. Any history book or Bible encyclopedia will provide more details as well.

The Egyptian period under the Ptolemies ran from 321 BC to 198 BC. We read about that in Daniel chapter 11:6-12. Because many of the Jewish people followed the Greek customs and spoke the Greek language, they began to lose their distinctive Jewish identity. It was during that time that the Hebrew Old Testament was translated into Greek.

The Syrian, or Seleucid dynasty ruled from 198 to 143 BC. You may reference Daniel 11:11-16 and 17-35. At first many of the Jews welcomed Syrian rule, and they granted many concessions to the people of Judea, but the Seleucids eventually attacked Judea under the ruler Antiochus Epiphanes.

He was like type of the future Antichrist. He was a harsh ruler. In 167 BC, he issued decrees prohibiting the practice of Jewish religion. He had copies of the scriptures destroyed. He abolished the food laws and the practice of circumcision. He even erected a statue of the Greek god Zeus in the temple and offered sacrifices of pig's blood on the altar.

This was picture of what will come during the time of the Antichrist. This is what Daniel and John refer to as the Abomination that causes desolation. This will ultimately be fulfilled through the Antichrist when he sets himself up in the temple during the tribulation period. In this period, God was stirring the hearts of the people to have a longing and anticipation for God's promised Messiah to come.

That led to a period under the Maccabeans. There was a revolt that took place. It was a 24-year war from 166 BC to 142 BC. This was also known as the Hasmonean period, and the Jews revolted under the leadership of Matthias and his sons Judas and Simon Maccabeus. Simon Maccabeus was a traditional figure in Jewish history because with

him the Hasmonean dynasty emerged. He was proclaimed as the great high priest and commander and leader of the Jews. He officially united himself under religious, military, and political power. He was the ruler over the Jewish state. It's during this time that the Syrians, the Samaritans, and the Edomites were all defeated.

John Hyrcanus was a primary political and religious leader in this period. This was what the Jews had hoped for in their Messiah – a political, military and religious leader. This dynasty produced the Herods and King Agrippa. John Hyrcanus made an alliance with Rome, and this and other events led to an internal civil war that continued beyond his death in 106 BC.

These political, cultural and military events were all focused on preparing the world for the Messiah to come on God's timetable. Following the Hasmonean period, Rome comes into prominence, and the next dynasty emerges. In 63 BC, under Roman General Pompey, Israel is captured and brought under Roman rule. Other political moves were happening as well.

Antipater, an Edomite, rose to favor within the Roman Empire and was able to get his sons placed into positions of power in Palestine. One of his sons was Herod, who became Herod the Great, and he was eventually declared king and became a dominant force in Palestine from 37 BC to 4 BC. He was a false king because he wasn't from the tribe of Judah. He was an Edomite. He was from the line of Esau, not from the tribe of Judah.

This is where the New Testament story begins, with Rome in control over the area of Palestine. Continuing on page 11, you can read about the religious background of the New Testament era.

There were many religions and philosophies associated with the Roman world.

The Jews were dispersed all throughout the Roman Empire. This was known as the diaspora.

There were many Greek and Roman gods that were worshipped. Gods like Venus and Aphrodite, Mars and Aries, Diana and Artemis. These represented the same gods but with different Roman and Greek names for the same god.

Emperor worship was present at that time. Caesar was considered a god. He was to be worshipped.

There were mysterious religions. Animism was present even in that day. There were appeals to experiences and emotions. There were secret initiations, ceremonial washings, sprinkling of blood, different drinks that people would take to receive power or spiritual protection from the spirit world. Things that we even experience in our world today, even throughout West Africa.

Gnosticism was growing at that time. It came from the Greek word for knowledge ("gnosis"). And it was a false knowledge. There was a belief that salvation could be achieved by obtaining special knowledge. Plato talked about this as well, that matter, the physical realm was evil. The spirit realm was good. So you could live any way you wanted because it didn't matter what happened in the body. This came into full swing more in the second century. We read about gnostic philosophies in Colossians and 1 John.

There were other kinds of philosophies. We might refer to them today as hedonism, new age thinking, legalism, even relativism. There is no absolute truth.

The world at that time was confused religiously and philosophically. People were in despair. People were looking for truth. The things that they were trusting in weren't working.

God was preparing the hearts of people to receive the Messiah, to receive the truth, to receive the opportunity to come back into Him and live under his kingdom rule.

From a religious point of view in Israel, there were many different groups of people who are part of the story of the New Testament who got their start in the years before Jesus came. These groups are listed beginning at the bottom of page 11.

The Pharisees believed strongly in separation of the ways and practices from the Gentiles. They focused on holiness, a strict interpretation of the law. There may have been more than 6,000 Pharisees during the time of Christ. Mostly were members of the middle class.

Turning the page 12, the Scribes were a class of Israelites. They were well-educated. It was their job to teach and interpret the law.

The Sadducees were less numerous than the Pharisees. They were wealthy people and had more political authority. They cooperated more with Rome than the Pharisees did. They rejected the Old Testament except for the Torah, the first five books of the Old

Testament. They were the guardians of the temple policies and practices. And when Jerusalem fell in 70 AD, that class, the Sadducees did not continue.

There were the Essenes. They were part of the holiness movement in that day. They originated during the times of the Maccabees. They said, let us separate from the world. Let's live in these isolated communities and protect the holiness of God by living strict and obedient lifestyles.

The Herodians were a political party that started during the reign of the Herodian dynasty. They were aligned with Rome. Many of the tax collectors were Herodians.

Zealots were those who desired to violently overthrow Rome. Barabbas, who was set free when Jesus was going to the cross was a zealot. He came from that class of people.

The Sanhedrin as a council or a governing body, much like the Jewish Supreme Court. There were 70 members, and the high priest was the president of the Sanhedrin.

Synagogue were a place for people to gather. After the destruction of the temple in 586 BC, Jews began to gather in synagogues. When Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 AD, there were more than 450 synagogues in Jerusalem alone.

These became the gathering places that were spread all throughout the known world at the start of the New Testament period. Think of it. God was preparing a place for the gospel first to go to the Jews and then go on to the Gentiles.

The temple was still in existence, first built by Solomon. It was destroyed by the Babylonians, rebuilt by Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah, built even to a greater degree by Herod the Great between 19 BC and 64 AD, and ultimately destroyed by Rome in 70 AD. The temple during that New Testament, was the focal point of Jewish religion and worship.

Continuing on to page 13, when the time was just right, Jesus was born. There are two words for "time" in the Bible. There is *chronos*, which is chronological time, and there is *kairos*, which means a moment in time.

This is a special event in time, and that's what we see in Mark 1:14-15. Jesus says, "The time (*kairos*) has come. The kingdom of God is here. Repent and believe the good news."

It was just the right time. Galatians 4:4-5 makes the same point.

And when the time was just right, at the fullness of time, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born of a virgin, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, so that we could become sons and daughters of God.

All of these historical, cultural and religious activities were taking place during the 400 year period between the Old and New Testaments. When it was time for Jesus to come, it would be just the right time.

It was the right time theologically. People were filled with despair and looking for political and religious freedom. The Old Testament scriptures were completed and translated into Greek at that time. The Greek language was the common language of the people, which would become the common language for the New Testament.

It was a right time culturally. Greek was the language of the people. It was estimated that more than four million Jews were scattered throughout the Roman Empire during the New Testament times. They represented about seven percent of the total population of the Roman world. Synagogues were established all over the place where people began to gather. God was working ahead of Jesus coming to prepare people for receiving the message of the gospel in a common language initially through the Jewish people that then it would flow into the Gentile world.

And it was the right time politically. Rome had established law and order. It was known as the Pax Romana, a time of great peace. The empire was united. There was a system of transportation. There were great roads throughout the Roman Empire God was preparing the world for the gospel to be spread across the continents of Africa, Asia, and Europe.

Between the end of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New Testament, God was at work. He was preparing people politically, culturally, and theologically for the coming of the Messiah. What was the theological message that we can take from this New Testament?

On page 14, you can read a short summary of the message of the New Testament.

I'll leave this to you to read through.

As a reminder, in the gospels, Jesus is revealed.

In the book of Acts, Jesus is preached.

In the epistles, Jesus is explained.

And in the book of Revelation, Jesus is expected.

And in each of these paragraphs, you can get a feel for the theological message that God was looking to communicate through the New Testament. He was preparing people to hear and respond to this message, just as we are prepared to hear and respond to the gospel in our time today.

On page 15, you can see the structure for telling the story of the New Testament. There are three points that we'll use as our outline for telling the story of the New Testament.

It's much easier, much simpler to tell than the story of the Old Testament. There are fewer twists and turns, fewer sections to focus on. So, there are three, and you can see at the bottom of page 15, a chart that summarizes these three points as well.

There's the gospel of the kingdom, the mission of the kingdom, and the hope of the kingdom. The New Testament would announce the fulfillment of God's Old Testament kingdom promises.

Point 1: The **GOSPEL** of the kingdom. The Old Testament shows the promise of God's kingdom, and the New Testament shows the fulfillment of that promise in the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus is at the center of the biblical story.

Point 2: God establishes his kingdom in the church and calls us to participate in his kingdom purpose. This is the **MISSION** of the kingdom.

Point 3: God's kingdom will ultimately triumph over the kingdom of this world. This is the **HOPE** of the kingdom.

Satan and the political, religious, and philosophical kingdoms of this world are in conflict with the kingdom of God. We saw that all the way going back to the Old Testament story. Much of the New Testament was written to people in churches that were suffering and being persecuted.

The good news that God shares is that Jesus Christ is victorious. In the face of persecution, in the face of suffering, we are to know that he has already won the victory. Although he was bruised on the heel, he has crushed the head of the serpent on the cross.

Going all the way back to the first red thread of the scriptures in Genesis 3:15. We are not fighting for victory, but we're fighting from a position of victory in Christ. We stand in the victory already won by Christ through the cross and the resurrection.

So these three points, the **gospel of the kingdom**, the **mission of the kingdom**, the **hope of the kingdom**, will be our outline for telling the story of the New Testament.

Page 16 is an activity you can review on your own. It's just going back to what we introduced in the story of the Old Testament.

What is needed for a kingdom? We need a king and we God's people in God's place, fulfilling God's purpose and law. You may use this chart or something that makes even more sense to you to summarize the story of the Old Testament. The kingdom of God and the kingdom of man are in conflict. We see how God's kingdom is always meant to draw people from the nations who are separated from God because of their sin. God desires to bring them back into relationship with him.

On page 17 you will remember our emphasis on the red thread of Jesus that is woven throughout the Old Testament and throughout the New Testament. This list is just a sample of just one red thread in each book of the Bible. Everything points forward to Jesus. He is the king over the eternal kingdom.

On pages 18 and 19 you'll find another tool that might help you tell the story of the New Testament.

The chart of page 18 begins with a brief story of the Old Testament from Formation, to the Theocracy, the Monarchy, the Exile and the Restoration. You can then transition to what was happening in history from the end of the Old Testament to the beginning of the New Testament. You can highlight how God was working through the Babylonian empire, the Persian empire, the Greeks, the Maccabean revolt, and then the Hasmonean period, and then the time of Rome to prepare the world for the coming of Jesus at just the right time.

It was the right time theologically, it was the right time culturally, it was the right time politically. God prepared the way for the story of the New Testament.

On page 19, there is a pictorial summary of where we'll go over the next three lessons as we talk about the story of the New Testament.

We'll talk about the gospels, the gospel of the kingdom, where Jesus is revealed. We'll look at Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

We'll look at the mission of the kingdom. We'll talk about the Book of Acts where Jesus is preached, and the Epistles where Jesus is explained.

And then the final part of the story is the hope of the kingdom. We will discuss a few key points from the book of Revelation where Jesus is expected. There will be a time of great tribulation and wrath leading up to the second coming of Jesus. Jesus will reign on earth for a thousand years, leading to the final judgment and the new heaven and the new earth, where we'll reign and live with Christ and God for eternity. This is a message of hope because as followers of Jesus, we have been given new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and brought into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade. It is kept and protected for us in heaven.

This is our outline for lessons two, three, and four. You can tell this story, just like the Old Testament story in 15 minutes or less.

We will tell the story of the New Testament through the gospel of the kingdom, the mission of the kingdom, and the hope of the kingdom.

The story is focused on Jesus as the King of kings and the Lord of lords.

I look forward to continuing this course with you as we begin Lesson 2: The Gospel of the Kingdom.