
THE FIRST CHRISTMAS | Breaking the Silence

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December 6, 2020

As we're about to turn the corner into 2021, many of us are probably hoping that somehow, when December 31st 2020 ends and January 1st, 2021 begins, a magic switch will be flipped and everything will be normal again. The reason we hope for something better is because 2020 has been a really hard year for people all over the world: so many are lonely and more isolated than ever, depression and addiction continues to skyrocket, many find themselves in the middle of financial uncertainty, family relationships are being strained, and relational tensions are high.

Unfortunately, when 2021 dawns, we're still going to have to navigate COVID-19, political and societal tensions will continue, and all of the craziness out there will still be around.

This leaves us asking a lot of questions: *God, where are you? What are you up to? What are you doing? Why are you silent?*

Pastor Steve and I want to invite you into a new series during the Christmas season, to journey with us back to the very first Christmas—to the 1st Century world into which Christ was born.

Contrary to modern depictions of peaceful nativity scenes or joy-filled Christmas carols, the world that Jesus Christ was born into was anything but peaceful, joyful, and serene. In order to understand the power, the meaning, and the significance of the Christmas story, we first have to understand the backstory.

ISRAEL'S HOPE FOUR HUNDRED YEARS OF SILENCE THE FULLNESS OF TIME

ISRAEL'S HOPE

For thousands of years the people of God had been waiting, longing, and hoping for the Son of God to come, for their promised Messiah.

We have the advantage of hindsight to see what they did not see and to know what they couldn't know, but put yourself in the shoes of the Israelites. They endured 400 years of slavery in Egypt, 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, and all of the cycles of deliverance and oppression chronicled in the book of Judges.

Throughout the entire Old Testament, God's people suffered. God's people faced horrendous injustice. The majority of the time, it was their own fault! They turned away from God, they got comfortable and complacent in the blessings of God, they trusted in false idols and gods, and **they forgot Him**.

But the theme of the entire Old Testament is:

**Even when God's people are faithless,
God is faithful.
He is sacrificially loyal to His people,
and He keeps every promise.**

God gave His people hints throughout history of the Who, how, when, and where of the Messiah's entrance into the world. Throughout the Old Testament, the promises and prophecies surrounding the birth, life, death, suffering, and resurrection of the Messiah are overwhelming! Consider just a few about Jesus's birth:

1. God pronounces judgment on the serpent

Genesis 3:15

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel.

- God told Israel, and tells us, that from the very beginning He already had a plan for salvation, that the Messiah would be born of a woman, and that the Child would grow up to suffer, but in His suffering, He would deliver a crushing and fatal blow to the deceiver.

2. The Messiah's bloodline

Genesis 12:3

I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

Genesis 17:19

Then God said, "No, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his descendants after him."

Numbers 24:17

I see Him, but not now; I behold Him, but not near; a Star shall come out of Jacob; a Scepter shall rise out of Israel, and batter the brow of Moab, and destroy all the sons of tumult.

- God tells us that the Messiah would come from the bloodline of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Read **Matthew 1** to follow the genealogy of Christ and see the fulfillment of these prophecies.

3. The virgin birth

Isaiah 7:14

Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel.

- Seven hundred years before the birth of Christ, Isaiah prophesied that a virgin would give birth to the Messiah and call him Immanuel, which means God With Us (**Luke 1–2**).

4. Bethlehem

Micah 5:2

But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me The One to be Ruler in Israel, Whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting.

- Also written about 700 years before the birth of Christ, Micah prophesied that the Messiah would come out of Bethlehem in the tribe of Judah (**Matthew 2:1**).
- Bethlehem was a tiny, obscure town, whose name means House of Bread. Jesus tells us that He is the Bread of Life (**John 6:35**).

5. The slaughter of children

Jeremiah 31:15

Thus says the Lord, "A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping, Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted for her children, because they are no more."

- Jeremiah prophesied that the Messiah's birth would set off a series of events that would lead to the slaughter of innocent children (**Matthew 2:16**).

6. Out of Egypt

Hosea 11:1

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called My son.

- Hosea prophesied that the Messiah would journey from Egypt (**Matthew 2:13–14**).

7. The Heir to the throne of David

Isaiah 9:6–7

For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, to order it and establish it with judgment and justice from that time forward, even forever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this.

- Isaiah prophesied that the Messiah would be an Heir to throne of David, and the genealogies show that Jesus is just that (**Matthew 1**).

8. The Messiah Anointed with Myrrh

Psalms 45: 6–8

Your throne, O God, is forever and ever; a scepter of righteousness is the scepter of Your kingdom. You love righteousness and hate wickedness; therefore God, Your God, has anointed You with the oil of gladness more than Your companions. All Your garments are scented with myrrh and aloes and cassia . . .

- Psalm 45 tells us the Messiah would be anointed with myrrh. **Matthew 2:11** says that the Wise Men brought offerings of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. **John 19:39** tells us that the body of the crucified Jesus was anointed in myrrh.

The people of God were yearning, longing, and hoping for their Deliverer, wondering how long it would be until He entered into the world to deliver His people and fulfill His promises. Throughout Israel's history, there were times when expectancy was high, and there were times when Israel would fall into despair and wonder if God was ever going to fulfill the promises that He made.

As these verses show, God had given His people reasons to hope.

FOUR HUNDRED YEARS OF SILENCE

Between the last words of the Old Testament and the first words of the New Testament, there were **400 years without a single prophecy from God**—no pronouncements from God, no letters, no Bible verses, not a single word.

Application—For context, generationally that's a great-great-grandparent all the way down to great-great-great-grandchildren without a single message from God. If you had lived during that time, you would have been wondering, *What are you doing, God? Where did You go? Why did You forsake us?* You would've been tempted to believe what each of us today is tempted to believe when we can't see God moving, when life is falling apart and God is nowhere to be found, when we're suffering. We're tempted to believe that maybe God isn't good, or maybe this situation escaped His attention, or maybe He doesn't care, or maybe He's not as powerful or loving as we thought.

This year has been such a year for wondering these things.

Have you been praying and pleading with God to come through in a specific way, and it feels like God is taking 400 years to answer your prayers?

Does God feel absent to you?

Has God's silence in your life caused you to wonder if He even exists?

If that's you, you're not alone. Know this:

**Often the times when God is silent
are when God is doing His best work.**

Question—What was God doing during the 400 years of silence?

THE FULLNESS OF TIME

Let's consider three historical events that any historian would tell you took place in human history between the end of Malachi and the beginning of Matthew, during those 400 years of silence. These events are not found in Scripture, but they are as much a part of our history as is every event written in Scripture.

1. Philip of Macedon and Alexander the Great

Philip was King of Macedon from 359–336 BC. He conquered Athens and Thebes and created a federation of Greek States called the League of Corinth in order to lead an army against the Persian Empire. His reign was cut short when he was assassinated in 336 BC. He was succeeded by His son Alexander, who we know as Alexander the Great.

Alexander the Great to this day is known as one of the—and maybe *the*—greatest military leader of all time. He led the Grecian Empire to conquer the known world.

Alexander died at 32 years old, but before he died, he made an incredibly important decision. The regions he conquered were disparate—there were a dozen or more languages, making it difficult to govern and relay orders and information quickly. Alexander decreed that everyone in the known world become fluent in **Koine' Greek**, common Greek. This would allow communication between military and political leaders to happen quickly and easily, legal documents to be written in the same language and shared without the need for translation, and governance to proceed with minimal frustration.

Guess what language the New Testament was written in? Koine' Greek.

Question—Could it be that what the world thought was a brilliant decision by military genius Alexander the Great was actually God working in the silence to get the world ready for the spread of the news of a Baby Boy born in Bethlehem?

Proverbs 21:1

The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, like the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes.

2. Pax Romana

Not too long after Alexander's death, another world power arose, conquered the Greeks, and spread their rule and influence across the Mediterranean world: **The Romans**. The Romans instituted across the expanse of their empire something called, "**Pax Romana,**" which is Latin for "**Roman peace.**" During Pax Romana, which began in 27 BC with the accession of Caesar Augustus and ended in 180 AD with the death of Marcus Aurelius, anyone who lived in the Roman Empire could travel freely without fear of violence or being killed. There were no travel restrictions within the Roman Empire—you were free to go from city to city with the guarantee of protection from the Roman government, backed by its mighty military.

3. Roman Roads

During this time, the Romans completely revolutionized their road systems. They established highways that connected major cities, towns, and military bases, which made the distribution of information far quicker and easier than it had ever been before.

So what you had—and this never before existed in human history—was:

1. A common language.
2. The Peace of Rome, which allowed people to travel without fear of violence.
3. An expansive and sophisticated road system connecting the major cities of the world.

Question—Could it be that what we perceive as the genius and industry of the Romans was really God creating the infrastructure and security that would allow for the spread of the news of the birth of the Messiah and of the Gospel?

**The reason we know the name Jesus—
that there was a woman named Mary
who had a Baby Boy in the town of Bethlehem—
Who we worship and adore as our Savior,
is because of what God was doing
during the 400 years of silence.**

More than 2,000 years ago, Jesus Christ was born, He lived, He died, He rose again, and the message of the Gospel spread like wildfire!

Why?

Because God was working behind the scenes, moving the pieces of the world into place so that at just the right time, His Son would be born to us.

Galatians 4:4-5

But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.

400 years of silence, and look at what God did.

400 years of despair, of questioning, of hopelessness, and look what God did.

**When the fullness of time had come,
God broke in on the world
that we might be adopted into His family
as His sons and daughters.**

Questions—Do you feel like God is silent this morning? Have you been wondering where in the world God is? Do you feel like no matter how hard you pray, it seems like God is ignoring you?

That couldn't be further from the truth.

If God was at work during the 400 years between Malachi and Matthew, you can trust that even though you can't see what He's up to, He's up to something, and **He's up to something good.**

What the very first Christmas tells us is that *just because we may feel forgotten doesn't mean we are.*

CONCLUSION

So if you . . .

feel like God has been silent, whether it's this week or this year,
have been wondering where God is and what He's up to,
feel like God has abandoned you or forsaken you . . .

If that's you, know this:

**Just like God was faithful during the 400 years of silence,
He will be faithful through whatever silence you're going through.
Christmas is the celebration of the silence being broken.**

Take heart. This is why Jesus came.

Take heart. Look at all God did between Malachi and Matthew.

Take heart. Even now, God is waiting for the opportune time to bring about what He knows is best.

Take heart.

Discussion Questions

1. Reflect on 2020. How eager are you for 2021 to look differently? Do you feel like God has been silent recently?
2. Discuss the context of the world within which Jesus was born and why that matters today.
3. What do the various prophecies about Jesus's birth and their fulfillment tell us about Israel's hope? About our hope?
4. Discuss: Often the times when God is silent are when God is doing His best work.
5. How does the work of Alexander the Great and the Romans testify to the faithfulness of God?
6. Can you think of other examples like these, where God can be seen working through the silence? How do these examples encourage you and give you hope?

NOTES