



What Happened In Between The OLD & NEW Testaments?

A Four-Session Advent Bible Study
About the Intertestamental Period
And Waiting for God in Our
“In Between” Moments

By Pastor Chris Mullis

Discover how God works in the silent, waiting seasons of life through *In Between*, a four-session Advent study. We'll explore the 400 years between the Old and New Testaments, learning how the history of that time period shaped the world into which the Messiah was born while reflecting on God's faithfulness, refining work, and call to be lights in a divided world. Each session prepares us for the celebration of Christ's birth and His promised return.

Bonus: The study concludes with an extra chapter with a Christmas Eve message.

Scan the QR code to the right
to watch or listen to the lessons:



In Between: An Advent Bible Study

Introduction

The Advent season invites us into a time of waiting, reflection, and preparation. This study, *In Between*, takes a closer look at the 400 years of silence between the Old and New Testaments—a time when God's people waited in faith for the coming of the Messiah. Each session reflects on what it means to wait faithfully, both in history and in our own lives, as we anticipate the celebration of Jesus' birth and His promised return. Through these lessons, we will discover how God works even when He seems silent, helping us learn to trust Him in the "in-between" moments of life.

This study features **four sessions**, each exploring a unique aspect of the intertestamental period and connecting it to the themes of Advent. It also includes a **bonus sermon for Christmas Eve**, providing a meaningful conclusion to your study and celebration of Christ's birth.

Study Sessions Overview

Session 1: Learning to Wait on the Lord

Scripture: Nehemiah 9:36-37

This session introduces the concept of waiting as part of God's plan. As we explore the struggles of Israel during the intertestamental period, we reflect on how waiting shapes our faith and helps us depend more fully on God.

Session 2: Trusting God's Timing

Scripture: Daniel 8:18-22

This session discusses the importance of trusting God's timing, even when it feels difficult. Drawing from historical events like the rise and fall of empires, we see how God was preparing the world for Jesus' arrival—and how He continues to work in our lives today.

Session 3: Refinement in the Waiting

Scripture: Malachi 3:1-5

Waiting can refine our hearts, much like fire purifies metal. This session examines the role of spiritual purification during times of waiting and challenges us to trust God's process of transformation as we prepare for the fulfillment of His promises.

Session 4: Unity in a Divided World

Scripture: Isaiah 49:5-7

In the final session, we look at the divisions among God's people before Christ's birth and explore how God's mission extends beyond national boundaries. As we prepare for Jesus' return, we reflect on how to live as lights in a divided world, bringing His salvation to all people.

Bonus Sermon: When Help Finally Comes (Christmas Eve)

Scripture: Luke 2:1-20

This Christmas Eve message wraps up the Advent journey by focusing on how God's help often comes in unexpected ways—like the birth of a Savior in a manger. Just as Israel's hope was

fulfilled through the arrival of Jesus, we are reminded that God's answers may not always look like we expect, but they are always exactly what we need. This sermon concludes with a call to welcome Christ into our lives and trust His ongoing work as we await His final return.

This Advent study invites us to embrace the waiting, trust God's timing, and prepare our hearts for the arrival of Jesus—not just at Christmas, but in all the "in-between" moments of life.

Suggested Format for this Study

The following format is a suggestion that has worked well for me, but feel free to adapt it to your teaching style and the resources available. Each lesson can easily be adjusted to last between one hour and an hour and a half.

Pre-Study Preparation

I recommend providing participants with a schedule, which can be created using the “Schedule Template” document. This helps keep everyone informed of the material to be covered in each session. Additionally, you might consider starting with an “Orientation” session. This will give you a chance to introduce yourself, get to know the participants, distribute study materials, explain the study format, and answer any questions they may have.

It can also foster community to offer light refreshments at the beginning of each session. Participants can sign up to take turns providing simple snacks, such as coffee and cookies. This not only helps set a relaxed tone but also gives participants a sense of ownership in the study. They can sign up for refreshments in the "notes" section of the “Schedule Template.”

Weekly Materials

Each week, participants will receive a sermon to read in preparation for the following session. I suggest distributing one sermon at a time to help participants stay focused and not read ahead. However, feel free to provide all the sermons at once if that works better for your group.

General Session Format

Below is a general format for each small group session:

- 1. Welcome and Opening Prayer (5-10 minutes)**
 - Begin by welcoming participants and offering an opening prayer.
- 2. Optional Introductory Video or Music (5-10 minutes)**
 - Through your own research and preparation, you may find videos or music that help introduce the theme. Feel free to play after the welcome to set the tone for the session.
- 3. Group Discussion (20-30 minutes)**
 - After the introduction, guide the group through a discussion based on the questions in the “Leader’s Guide” at the end of each sermon.
 - Your role as the facilitator is not to have all the answers but to guide and encourage meaningful conversation. The provided questions are a starting point—feel free to adapt or ask follow-up questions based on the group's thoughts and interests.

- While some discussions may naturally stray from the topic, it's important to discern whether these tangents are worth exploring or if it's time to steer the group back to the main topic.

4. Intercessory Prayer (5-10 minutes)

- End each session with a time of prayer. Allow participants to share any praises or concerns, and then pray over them as a group. It can be helpful to keep a list of these requests to follow up on them in future sessions.

What Happened In Between The OLD & NEW Testaments?

Join Us for "In Between: An Advent Bible Study" – Discover how God works in the silent, waiting seasons of life through *In Between*, a four-session Advent study. We'll explore the 400 years between the Old and New Testaments, reflecting on God's faithfulness, refining work, and call to be lights in a divided world. Each session prepares us for the celebration of Christ's birth and His promised return. The study concludes with a special Christmas Eve message. Don't miss this opportunity to grow in faith and hope this Advent season!

Date	Topic	Notes
	Introduction and Orientation	
	Session 1: Learning to Wait on the Lord – Nehemiah 9:36-37	
	Session 2: Trusting God's Timing – Daniel 8:18-22	
	Session 3: Refinement in the Waiting – Malachi 3:1-5	
	Session 4: Unity in a Divided World - Scripture: Isaiah 49:5-7	
	Optional Christmas Party	

In Between, part 1

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Nehemiah 9:36-37



Introduction

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. Advent is a season of waiting and preparation. We are preparing for Christmas—the celebration of Jesus’ birth. But we are also waiting for the *second coming of Christ*, for it was promised Jesus would return to judge the living and the dead, and to right all

that is wrong with the world. Then God will recreate the heavens and the earth, and we will live with God forever in Paradise.

But in the meantime, we are waiting.

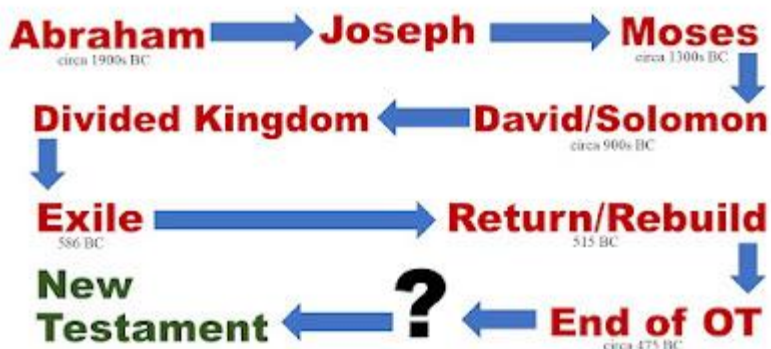
Waiting is an important part of God’s plan for His people. It can feel like nothing happens while you wait, but God is at work. This series will examine what happened to God’s people in the period in between the Old Testament and the beginning of the New Testament while they waited for the Messiah to be born. This series is also designed to help *you* in those times when you feel stuck in between, waiting.

Timeline of the Old Testament

The Bible is divided into two Testaments – the Old Testament & the New Testament. The Old Testament primarily deals with God’s covenant with Israel. The New Testament primarily deals with God’s new covenant with all people, made possible through God’s only begotten Son, Jesus, who was the Messiah the Jews longed for.

Here’s a quick review of the Bible. First there was Abraham (circa 1900s BC). About 400 years later, one of Abraham's decedents, Joseph, went down to Egypt. Then the Israelites became slaves in Egypt for 400 years. Next, Moses delivered the Israelites (circa 1300s BC). About 400 years

Timeline of the Old Testament



later, David was anointed king of Israel followed by David's son King Solomon (900s BC). After Solomon, there was a civil war between the northern and southern tribes of Israel. Israel split into two kingdoms--Samaria in the North and Judea in the South (we get the name "Jews" from Judea). In 586 BC, Judea was conquered by Babylon and all the inhabitants were taken away into captivity in Babylon. about 70 years later, the captives were allowed to return and rebuild Jerusalem & the Temple (515 BC). Finally, the last book of the Old Testament was composed about 475 BC.

Nothing else was added to the Bible until the New Testament detailed the events from the first century AD after Christ was born. What happened during the 400 or so years between the Old and New Testament? We find a clue in the Book of Nehemiah, which was written close to the end of the OT. In particular, Nehemiah 9:36-37 was written about events that happened about 515 BC.

Nehemiah 9:36-37

³⁶ “So now today we are slaves in the land of plenty that you gave our ancestors for their enjoyment! We are slaves here in this good land. ³⁷ The lush produce of this land piles up in the hands of the kings whom you have set over us because of our sins. They have power over us and our livestock. We serve them at their pleasure, and we are in great misery.”



Nehemiah Rebuilds Jerusalem

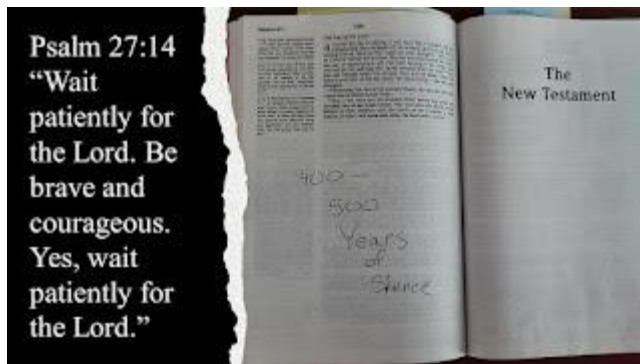
Nehemiah was living as one of the conquered Jewish exiles in Persia when the king of Persia (Artaxerxes) decided to let the Jewish exiles return home to Jerusalem. The king of Persia commissioned Nehemiah to govern Jerusalem and help oversee the rebuilding of the city and the Temple.

It was a time of great hope for Jews. They hoped that Jerusalem might return to the glory of Solomon's days. They hoped to achieve religious freedom, peace, and prosperity. They longed to rebuild and worship in their own Temple once again.

Unfortunately, their hopes were never fully realized. The Temple was rebuilt, but it was a shadow of its former glory. In fact, the Bible record that the people who had known the glory of Solomon's Temple wept because the new Temple was only a shadow of its former glory. The reality is the Jews were “slaves in the land” of Israel (Nehemiah 9:36). They remained vassals, subjugated to the more powerful Kingdoms around them. Throughout the 400–500-year period between the Old and New Testaments, the Jews were passed around between the various empires that rose to power in the region. They were not treated with dignity or respect. They were merely

pawns in an international chess match. They were disposable, vulnerable, and a commodity to be used by more powerful people. Nehemiah 9:37 says, “We serve them at their pleasure, and we are in great misery.” And that about sums up the Jewish people’s 400 year experience from the time they returned from exile until the time when Jesus was born—the entire period between the Old and New Testaments.

And while in former times, God had sent prophet's like Isaiah and Jeremiah and Hosea and Micah to speak His word to them--words so powerfully inspired people collected them in our Bible--no one spoke inspired words worthy of being included in the Bible for 400 years after the completion of Malachi. It seems as if God was silent.



This was not the first time God was silent. It also wasn’t the first time God’s people had to wait. Remember, the Israelites were slaves in Egypt for 400 years before God sent Moses to deliver them. At least during the intertestamental period, they were slaves in their own land.

Still, it’s hard to patiently suffer and wait on God when it feels like He is being silent and doesn’t care. God does care, but sometimes, He has to let us wait and ripen until the time is right to fulfill His plan.

In the meantime, we have to be patient and wait on the Lord. Psalm 27:14 says, “Wait patiently for the Lord. Be brave and courageous. Yes, wait patiently for the Lord.”

And James 5:7 says, “Dear brothers and sisters, be patient as you wait for the Lord’s return.”

Even if you suffer while you wait, God can use it to bless you when you trust Him & are faithful. God gives you time to think and grow while you wait for the right opportunities and pass on the wrong ones. God helps you when you are really hungry and waiting for good food. He teaches you, “Man does not live by bread alone, but by every Word that comes from the mouth of God.” Waiting for God gives you time to realize, He is Your only hope.

Sometimes, people pause for effect before they say something really important. After the Old Testament, God paused to let people know He was about to speak the most important Word He would ever give--the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ.

The Israelites had to wait for 400 years before their Messiah came, but that 400 years was time for important work in the hearts of His people.

While
You Are
Waiting

Realize You
Are Hopeless
Without God

First, the pause between the Old and New Testaments gave Israelites time to exhaust all their own schemes and realize, they were hopeless without God.

Israel was a small, insignificant land stuck in between massively powerful empires. They were never going to

have enough resources or a powerful enough army to dominate others.

Their only hope was the Lord. Again, and again the Jews tried to establish their own kingdom by their own hands, but again and again they failed. By the time Jesus came, most people realized their only hope was the Lord. It would only be by the direct intervention of God Almighty that they would find salvation. The name “Messiah” means the one chosen by God to save. Jesus is the Messiah.

What about you? Do you realize your only hope is the Lord?

Have you been trying to *make* your own plans work by your own hand?

Don't you realize, any “kingdom” you build will not stand. It will fail.

But the plans of the Lord will last forever. Learn to wait on the Lord.

While
You Are
Waiting

Discover Your
Core Values

Second, the time of waiting in between the Old and New Testaments gave the Israelites time to discover their “line in the sand”.

Since Israel had to compromise on many things in order to survive in a hostile world surround by more powerful nations, they really had to

learn their core values—the essentials of being faithful to God that they could not compromise. Not everything is worth fighting about. But some things are worth dying for. It's critical to know the difference.

What about you? Do you know who you really are?

What are the core values you can't compromise? What are the deal breakers for you?

How do you deal with people who cross the line?

Romans 12:18 says, “Do *all that you can* to live in peace with everyone.”

How do you live that out? How do you know if it's time to compromise or take a stand?

How do you avoid sin and honor God when you take your stand?



Third, the time of waiting in between the Old and New Testaments helped many Israelites grow closer to God.

Waiting for something important can either drive you away from God or draw you closer. Some Israelites tried to build their own kingdoms. In the weeks ahead, we will learn about some of the

different political and religious groups in Israel and how they tried to build their own kingdoms of Israel. Thankfully, there were also many people (like The Wisemen in the East, and Simeon and Anna in Luke 2) who grew closer to God by waiting on God, praying, worshiping, and patiently trusting God's plan.

How about you?

How can you grow closer to God as you wait faithfully through prayer, study, fasting, and serving?

Closing Thoughts to Contemplate

Contemplate how you can grow closer to the Lord as you prepare for Christmas?

What will it take for you to finally realize you are hopeless without God?

What are your core values?

What practical steps could you take this season to truly depend upon God, discover who you really are, and prepare for the coming of the Lord?

Session 1 Leader's Guide

Greeting – Welcome participants, make announcements, and handout material for the next class.

Opening Prayer – Thank God for the chance to study together and pray for wisdom.

Introduction and Overview (10-15 minutes)

- **Brief Summary of the Sermon's Key Themes:**
 - Waiting and preparation in Advent.
 - The 400 years of silence between the Testaments.
 - God's people learning dependence, setting boundaries, and growing spiritually through waiting.
- **Ask:** “Have you ever experienced a season where you felt ‘in between,’ waiting for God to act? How did it feel?”

Scripture Focus (15-20 minutes)

- **Read Nehemiah 9:36-37 aloud.**
 - Discuss: *How does this passage reflect the struggle of waiting on God?*
- **Key Discussion Question:**
 - “What might God have been teaching the Israelites during their long period of waiting?”
 - Encourage participants to think about the silence and suffering they experienced.

Discussion Time (20-30 minutes)

- **Split into small groups** (if possible) or have a whole-group discussion.
- **Discussion Questions:**
 1. What do you do when it feels like God is silent?
 2. How do you discern your “line in the sand” – those non-negotiable values in your life?
 3. What practical ways can we grow closer to God while waiting? (Prayer, fasting, etc.)
 4. Are there areas in your life where you need to stop trying to build your own “kingdom” and rely more on God?
- **Optional Activity:**
 - Write down one personal “waiting” experience and a lesson God may be teaching through it.
 - Share with the group if comfortable.

Application and Reflection (10-15 minutes)

- **Group Reflection Questions:**

- “As we prepare for Christmas, what steps can you take to grow spiritually during Advent?”
- “What would it look like to fully trust God and rely on Him in your life right now?”
- **Encourage practical action steps:**
 - Example: Daily prayer or journaling about areas where you feel “in between” and waiting on God.

Closing Thoughts and Prayer (5-10 minutes)

- Summarize key takeaways from the discussion:
 - God is working even in the silence.
 - Waiting can strengthen faith and clarify values.
 - Advent is a season for reflection, growth, and preparation.
- **Close with Intercessory Prayer**
 Allow the class to share any praises or concerns they have. Make a prayer list to keep track of them. Close the class by praying over the praises and concerns the class named.

In Between, part 2

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Daniel 8:18-22



Introduction

Do you ever feel stuck in between, like you're just waiting for something important to happen? What's the hardest part of waiting? I asked that question in a Facebook post this week. Here are some of the responses:

- The number one response was "waiting" – or being patient
- Letting go of control
- The anticipation
- To keep doing your daily activities while you wait
- Sacrificing pride
- Not knowing how long you'll need to wait
- Worrying about what you're missing
- Worrying someone else is getting something at your expense
- The unknown
- Thoughts in your head
- Trusting God
- Knowing there is something you want or want to do but being frustrated because you have to wait to get it.

Forty years of Stanford research found that people able to wait patiently and delay their own gratification are more likely to succeed in life than those who don't. [\[1\]](#)

The Bible is filled with long periods of time when people had to wait and delay gratification while enduring hardship. Abraham and Sarah had to wait until they were old to have their promised son, Isaac. The Hebrews were slaves in Egypt 400 years before they entered the Promised Land. David had to wait to become king of Israel. And there was a 400-year period of waiting between the time the Old Testament was completed and the New Testament began with the birth of Jesus, the Messiah.

That long period of silence in between the Old and New Testament leads many to think nothing important happened, but nothing could be farther from the truth. Case and point: When the OT closes the Persians were in control and everyone was

speaking Aramaic. When the NT opens the Romans are in control and everyone is speaking Greek. Apparently, a lot happened in those in between years.

I want to recap the history of Israel from 475 BC to the time Jesus was born. But first, I want to read a strange apocalyptic passage from Daniel chapter 8. I want to read it, because it is a prophecy that God gave to Daniel while he was living as an exile in Babylonia. And yet this prophecy foretold all the kingdoms that would rule over Israel before the Messiah was born. Let's look at the passage and then review the actual history of the intertestamental period.

Daniel 8:18-22

¹⁹ Then he said, "I am here to tell you what will happen later in the time of wrath. What you have seen pertains to the very end of time.

Daniel 8:18-22

¹⁸ While he was speaking, I fainted and lay there with my face to the ground. But Gabriel roused me with a touch and helped me to my feet.

¹⁹ Then he said, "I am here to tell you what will happen later in the time of wrath. What you have seen pertains to

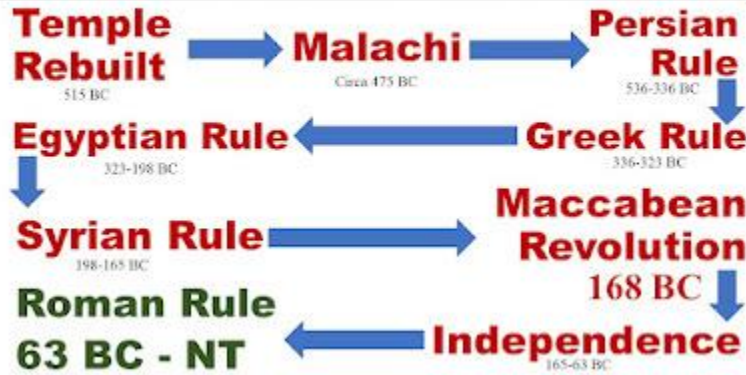
the very end of time. ²⁰ The two-horned ram represents the kings of Media and Persia. ²¹ The shaggy male goat represents the king of Greece, and the large horn between his eyes represents the first king of the Greek Empire. ²² The four prominent horns that replaced the one large horn show that the Greek Empire will break into four kingdoms, but none as great as the first.

What a strange passage! But it refers to actual event that happened between 475 BC and 4 BC when Jesus was born. Let's look at that history and listen to the parts of Daniel's prophecy.

Daniel 8:19 says, "I am here to tell you what will happen later in the time of wrath."

Jerusalem was destroyed in 586 BC by Babylon and the Jews, including Daniel, were taken into captivity. However, Babylon was destroyed by the Medes and Persia. **Daniel 8:20: "The two-horned ram represents the kings of Media and Persia."**

Timeline 6 of the BIG “In Between”



The King of Persia sent the Jews home to Jerusalem and they rebuilt their temple in 515 BC and then the last book of the Old Testament, Malachi, was written about 475 BC.

The Jews remained under Persian Rule until a guy from Greece named

Alexander the Great tried to conquer the whole world. The “whole world” included Israel and Jerusalem.

So, from 336-323 BC, Israel was part of the Greek Empire & they learned to speak Greek. Greek became the universal language of the world (the way English is today), which is why the New Testament would eventually be written in Greek. **Daniel 8:21** says, “**The shaggy male goat represents the king of Greece, and the large horn between his eyes represents the first king of the Greek Empire.**” The king of Greece was Alexander the Great.

Alexander the Great died unexpectedly in 323 BC. After his death, the Greek empire splintered into four smaller, less powerful kingdoms—the Ptolemaic Kingdom of Egypt, the Seleucid Empire in Syria, the Kingdom of Pergamon in Asia Minor, and the Macedonia Kingdom in Greece. **Daniel 8:22** says, “**The four prominent horns that replaced the one large horn show that the Greek Empire will break into four kingdoms, but none as great as the first.**”

After Alexander the Great’s death, the Israelites were ruled by the Ptolemaic Kingdom of Egypt from 323-198 BC. The Hebrew Old Testament was translated into Greek, giving us the Septuagint. It was also during this period that Jews began to separate themselves into two major schools of thought. There were the Hellenist who wanted to welcome Greek culture and philosophy into the Jewish religion. On the opposite side were the Hassidic Jews who wanted to keep Jewish culture and religion pure and undefiled. These “pious ones” as they were called, eventually evolved to become the Pharisees of the New Testament.

We will look more at the other Kingdoms that ruled Israel in the coming weeks. But very quickly, we see Syrian Kingdom conquered Israel from the Egyptians in 198 BC and ruled until 165 BC.

The Maccabean Revolt of 168 led to 100 years of independence (and is the event that inspired the modern Jewish holiday of Hanukkah, which lasts eight days and ends this year on December 6th).

However, independence was short lived and tumultuous and never lived up to God's standards for His Kingdom. And the Romans conquered Israel in 63 BC and ruled for 400 years until 313 AD.

Waiting is Hard

Waiting can be hard—especially when you don't know when the waiting will and you feel like you've lost control. However, *God* is in control. Daniel's prophecy shows that God knew everything that was going to happen in Israel in between the Old and New Testaments. And God also knew how all these events would shape the world to get us ready to receive the Messiah.

Some will wonder, "Why didn't God just send the Messiah? Why wait 400 years?" Well, I don't pretend to know the mind of God and all His purposes and plans. I do know that there were huge differences between the world of 500 BC and the time Christ was born.

First of all, those 500 years of the Intertestamental period allowed time for the Greek language to spread so that people across the world could understand each other from one end to the other. Also, new roads and international trade routes and diplomatic agreements made travel more possible. In 500 BC, people were using scrolls and clay tablets. The New Testament was written in books and letters in the first century AD. Books and letters were a new technology that made sending written information about Christ easier. Thus, the Good News about Jesus was able to spread across the world in the first century AD in ways that weren't possible in 500 BC. Israel wasn't ready for the Messiah in 500 BC. The world wasn't ready either.

Learn How to Wait Well

Studies show that people who know how to wait well are more successful and happier than those who need immediate gratification. Whether or not you feel like you have the discipline to be patient, there are things you can do to improve your ability to wait well. You can train your patience just like you can train your muscles in the gym.

5 Tips To Improve Your Ability To Wait Well

Here are five tips that can help you practice being patient.

First, don't worry. Jesus said, "don't worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring its own worries. Today's trouble is enough for today." (Matthew 6:34) He taught His disciples to simply seek God's Kingdom and His righteousness and trust God to take

care of the rest. Stay focused on doing God's will and everything will fall into its proper place *and you won't be letting your thought be dominated by worries about things you can't control anyway.*

Second, enjoy the moment. When your thoughts are consumed by what might happen next, you can miss out on the beautiful life you have right now. Learn to appreciate the many, many blessings God is giving you today. Tomorrow will be here soon enough. They say, "A watched pot never boils." If you dwell on waiting for something to happen, it will seem to take forever. However, "time flies when you're having fun." If you focus on enjoying the blessings God has for you right now in this moment, those times will fly by and you're waiting for whatever's coming next will soon be over.

Third, practice being uncomfortable. There are going to be times in life when you experience pain, hurt, sickness, and many other uncomfortable circumstances. You might well practice getting used to it. Practice denying yourself. Skip a meal (fasting). Spend some time being bored (on purpose). Exercise hard and make your body sore. Learn to deal with the pain and discomfort in a controlled environment. It will help you deal with being uncomfortable later.

Fourth, wait before you make a big purchase. Rather than making an impulse buy, set a rule that you have to wait 24 hours before you buy something. If you see it today and you want it today (and you can get it today), make yourself wait 24 hours. It'll still be there tomorrow. So, wait until tomorrow. Two things may happen if you wait. First, you may discover you really didn't need or want that thing you almost bought on impulse. Second, you will train yourself to delay gratification.

Lastly, challenge yourself. If you truly feel stuck, like you're not going anywhere, then do something proactive to improve yourself. Times when you're waiting are great times to get training that will give you new skills. Go back to school or take a course. Read a book. Listen to a podcast. These things will give you new skills and insights and may also inspire you about the next steps you could take.

Jesus is With Us

The Good News is, we aren't waiting alone. Jesus is there with us in those in between times too. Jesus is not dead. He is risen. And He is with us while we wait. So, Jesus helps us find new strength and courage. He will nourish your soul and fill you with hope as you wait patiently for His return and for whatever important changes you may come.

[i] <https://jamesclear.com/delayed-gratification?fbclid=IwAR2XpwUq2x6V4W0IUBKGgxJ78cB4I9D5Glguc8g6C0fsfPiU8lXYHvzZVQ>

Session 2 Leader's Guide

Greeting – Welcome participants, make announcements, and handout material for the next class.

Opening Prayer – Thank God for the chance to study together and pray for wisdom.

Scripture Reading and Brief Overview (10-15 minutes)

- **Read Daniel 8:18-22 aloud.**
 - Highlight the meaning of the ram and goat from the passage and how it relates to the prophecy about world empires ruling over Israel between the Testaments.
- **Quick Recap of the Intertestamental Period:**
 - Key historical events: Persian rule, Greek conquest, Alexander the Great's death, Maccabean Revolt, Roman conquest.
 - Emphasize: God was at work shaping the world during these years, preparing the way for Christ's arrival.

Teaching Segment: Lessons on Waiting (15-20 minutes)

- **Key Points from the Sermon:**
 1. **Waiting is hard, but God is in control.**
 2. **The right timing prepares the world and us for what's to come.**
 3. **We can train ourselves to wait well through practical steps.**
- **Ask:** "What has been one of the hardest things you've had to wait for? How did you see God working in that season?"

Small Group Discussion (25-30 minutes)

- **Split into small groups** (if possible) or discuss as a whole group.
- **Discussion Questions:**
 1. Why do you think waiting is such a challenge, as highlighted in the Facebook responses shared in the sermon?
 2. How do you feel knowing that God used the time between the Old and New Testaments to prepare the world for Jesus?
 3. How can we learn to trust God's timing when we don't understand the wait?
 4. Which of the five tips to wait well (don't worry, enjoy the moment, practice discomfort, delay purchases, challenge yourself) stood out to you? How can you apply it in your life?

Application Activity: Create a Personal Plan for Waiting Well (15 minutes)

- **Individual Reflection:**

- Ask participants to write down one area in their life where they are waiting for God to act.
- Then have them write down one specific step from the sermon they will apply to practice waiting well (e.g., fasting, journaling, limiting impulse purchases).

- **Pair and Share:**

- If time allows, participants can share their plan with a partner for accountability and encouragement.

Closing Thoughts and Group Reflection (10-15 minutes)

- **Reflection Questions for Group:**

- What encourages you about knowing that Jesus is with us while we wait?
- How can the Advent season help us practice patience and focus on God's presence?
- What is one thing you'll do differently this week to wait well?

Closing Prayer (5-10 minutes)

- Summarize the key takeaways:

- God is always working, even when we can't see it.
- Waiting is hard, but it helps us grow closer to God and prepares us for His plans.

- **Close with Intercessory Prayer**

Allow the class to share any praises or concerns they have. Make a prayer list to keep track of them. Close the class by praying over the praises and concerns the class named.

In Between, part 3

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Malachi 3:1-5



Introduction

This series examines what happened during the intertestamental period of Christian history. The 400-year period of God's silence between the completion of the Old Testament and the birth of Christ was a pause that punctuated the greatest Word God ever spoke: Luke 2:10-11, "I bring you good

news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David!"

Jesus came in peace, offering God's grace and mercy and forgiveness. However, many in Israel were hoping for and expecting a military leader who would violently conquer God's enemies and drive them from the Holy Land. What accounts for this dramatic difference between God's plan and the hopes of so many?

Part of the reason they expected and hoped for a mighty conqueror instead of a suffering savior has much to do with the history of Israel during the 4 centuries between the Old and New Testaments. I want to explore more of that history today. In particular, I want to focus on the Maccabean Revolt, which is the inspiration for the modern Jewish holiday Hanukkah.

Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament, was written around 475 BC. God spoke through the prophet.

Malachi 3:1-5

"Look! I am sending my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. Then the Lord you are seeking will suddenly come to his Temple. The messenger of the covenant, whom you look for so eagerly, is surely coming," says the Lord of Heaven's Armies.

² "But who will be able to endure it when he comes? Who will be able to stand and face him when he appears? For he will be like a blazing fire that refines metal, or like a strong soap that bleaches clothes. ³ He will sit like a refiner of silver, burning away the dross. He will purify the Levites, refining them like gold and silver, so that they may once again offer acceptable sacrifices to the LORD. ⁴ Then once more

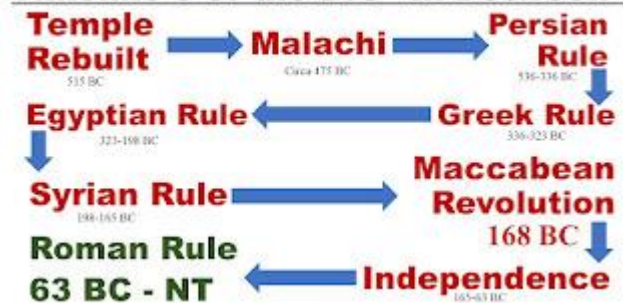
the LORD will accept the offerings brought to him by the people of Judah and Jerusalem, as he did in the past.

⁵“At that time I will put you on trial. I am eager to witness against all sorcerers and adulterers and liars. I will speak against those who cheat employees of their wages, who oppress widows and orphans, or who deprive the foreigners living among you of justice, for these people do not fear me,” says the LORD of Heaven’s Armies.

Briefly Explain Passage

Judgment is certainly a theme of this passage. God says, the “Lord” the people were seeking would judge sinners (and this refers to Jesus, the Messiah). God says, the Messiah will come to the Temple and purify like a refiner’s fire. And God also says there will be a trial and judgment against evil doers—in particular against sorcerers, adulterers, liars, people who cheat their employees, people who oppress widows and orphans, and people who deprive foreigners of justice. What many in Israel didn't understand, is that much of that judgment would be of the Israelites, for they continually failed to fulfill their role as God's people.

Timeline 3 of the BIG “In Between”



What Happened Between the Old and New Testaments?

After Malachi spoke, no other prophet’s words were preserved in the Bible. Israel was ruled by the Persian Empire. Then, Alexander the Great of Greece conquered most of the known world—including Persia. Israel was ruled by Greece for 13 years, and the

Greek Empire changed the world. Greek became the universal language almost everyone could speak. But when Alexander the Great died unexpectedly, His empire broke into 4 smaller, less powerful Kingdoms—Macedonia, Ptolemaic Egypt, Seleucid Syria, and Pergamum.

The first little Greek kingdom to rise to prominence and rule Israel for 125 years were the Greek Egyptians. They allowed Israel a certain amount of autonomy, but they encouraged the Israelites to adopt many elements of Greek religion, culture, and language.

Many Israelites among the upper crust of society accepted these new Greek ideas. You had to “Hellenize” (become more Greek) if you wanted to succeed and move up the social ladder. To resist or reject Greek influence was to be seen as backwards, outdated, ignorant, and irrelevant.

To be sure, there were many positive elements of Greek culture—systems of reason and logic, mathematics, architecture. If you enjoy using an umbrella or a map, you can thank the Greeks who brought these things to prominence. However, along with many good things, also came expectations to worship Greek gods and demigods like Zeus, Hercules, Pan, and others. A rift formed in Israelite society between those who accepted Greek culture in order to move up and those who remained “pure” and faithful only to Yahweh, the God of Israel.

The second “little Greek” kingdom to rule over Israel were the Greek Syrians. When they took over from the Egyptians in 198 BC, they started playing hardball with Israel. The Syrians were tired of the stubborn, rebellious Israelites clinging to their Jewish culture and religion. All the other conquered peoples of the Greek world had welcomed Greek religion. The Jews were the main hold outs. The Syrians made it a goal to rid Israel of Judaism and replace it with Greek culture and religion.

The Syrians tried to transform the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem into a temple to worship the Greek gods. Jewish sacrifices, circumcision, observance of the Sabbath, and Jewish feasts were forbidden. Jewish sacrifice in the Holy Temple were replaced with sacrifices to Zeus and included unclean animals, like pigs, which were offensive to Jews.

One priest in Modi‘im, a small town outside Jerusalem, had had enough. When a Syrian official tried to enforce heathen sacrifice in his town, Mattathias Maccabeus murdered the Syrian official. He and his sons, the Maccabees, fled into the Judean wilderness and began a 32-year revolt. They fought against the Syrians and also raided Jewish towns and killed any Jews that sacrificed to Greek gods or who collaborated with the “Hellenists”.

Little by little, the Maccabee’s guerrilla warfare wore down the Greek Syrian kingdom. The Maccabees recaptured and cleansed the Jerusalem Temple in 165 BC. Many believed this was the fulfillment of Malachi’s prophesy in Malachi 3:1, where it said, “The Lord you are seeking will suddenly come to his Temple...”

The Jews gained independence in 142 BC. Jewish kings once again rule in Jerusalem. The Hasmoneans dynasty were ruthless kings who were not of the royal line of David. In 128 BC, they raided the northern territory of Samaria and demanded the Samaritans convert to Judaism. When the Samaritans refused, the Jews destroyed the Samaritan’s temple in Shechem. This and other events like it led to the bitter animosity between Jews and Samaritans we read about in the New Testament.

The Hasmonean rulers of Jerusalem served as both kings and high priests. They were not pure or holy or even good and they were not of the royal line of David. A

politically savvy group known as the Sadducees, said it didn't matter. The Sadducees preferred terrible Jewish rulers to good pagan rulers. The Pharisees said a true king must be of the line of David and never accepted the Hasmonean royal line. This became a bitter dispute that divided the Pharisees (who wanted a return to pure Judaism) and the Sadducees (who were willing to compromise for political expediency). That division persisted into the New Testament where we read about Christian's interactions with both the Pharisees and Sadducees.

The reconstituted, independent Israel was not a kingdom to be proud of. There was no justice. There was no peace. Violence and chaos were the order of the day. Leaders said they worshiped God, but their religion was a lie. They embodied the sins Malachi 3:5 rebukes--people "who cheat employees of their wages, who oppress widows and orphans, or who deprive the foreigners living among you of justice, for these people do not fear me."

In 63 BC, a new and more powerful empire marched its legions into Jerusalem and took over. The Roman Empire's rule of Jerusalem had begun and the people still yearned for a Messiah to come save them from oppression and finally bring God's Kingdom on earth. Would this Messiah be like Mattathias Maccabeus—a priest who murdered oppressive officials, waged war on God's enemies, and violently cleansed the Temple in Jerusalem?

Many believed and hoped the Messiah would be like the Maccabees, but God had a much better plan. He foretold the Messiah's who would be called: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9:6). The true Messiah's plan is foretold in Isaiah 61:1, where it says, "The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is upon me, for the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to comfort the brokenhearted and to proclaim that captives will be released and prisoners will be freed."

And Jesus came and read these very words from the scroll of Isaiah and said in Luke 4:18, "The Scripture you've just heard has been fulfilled this very day!"



Conclusion

As we wait for Christmas, we still don't know how long we need to wait for Jesus to finally return to judge the living and the dead and right all the wrongs of our broken world.

Waiting is hard.

While we wait, it is tempting to skip ahead and put our hope in people we admire. We might think, "Perhaps this religious leader is the one we can trust." Or we say, "Maybe that celebrity is someone we can truly admire." Or we hope, "Maybe the next president will be the one who puts our country back on the right track."

Why do we think our help will come from one of these worldly solutions and not from Jesus, the true Messiah?

And while we wait, it is so easy to waiver back and forth between compromising important core values we should never compromise for the sake of practicality *or* being militant idealists who are incapable of any compromise at all.

Perhaps the best course of action while we wait is to allow Jesus to fulfill Malachi's words *in us*:

To allow Jesus to purify us,
refining us like gold and silver,
burning away all the impurities *in us*.

Perhaps it is best, while we wait, that *we* truly live for God in Christ
by not cheating employees of their wages,
by no oppressing widows and orphans,
by not depriving the foreigners living among *us* of justice.

Perhaps, while we wait, we should be about fulfilling Jesus' mission when he quoted Isaiah 61:1,

The Lord has anointed me to:
bring good news to the poor
comfort the brokenhearted and
proclaim that captives will be released,
and prisoners will be freed.

Waiting is hard.

But sometimes, God Himself is the One who tells us to wait and be faithful.
And while we wait, we should worship and serve God and God alone
by living out the principles and mission of Jesus Christ.

Session 3 Leader's Guide

Greeting – Welcome participants, make announcements, and handout material for the next class.

Opening Prayer – Thank God for the chance to study together and pray for wisdom.

Scripture Reading and Overview (10-15 minutes)

- **Read Malachi 3:1-5 aloud.** Briefly explain:
 - **Judgment** will come to those who fail to live faithfully.
 - **The Messiah's coming** will refine and purify God's people.
 - How Malachi's prophecy connects to both the Maccabean Revolt and the coming of Jesus.
- **Ask:** "What stands out to you in this passage about God's judgment and purification?"

Review of the Historical Context (10-15 minutes)

- **Teach Briefly:**
 - **The Intertestamental Period:** Persian rule, Greek influence, the Maccabean Revolt, and Roman conquest.
 - **The Maccabean Revolt:** A fight for independence but also a time of moral compromise and division (Pharisees vs. Sadducees).
 - **Connection to Jesus:** Many hoped for a Messiah like the Maccabees but instead got the Prince of Peace.
- **Discuss:** "How do you think waiting so long for deliverance affected the expectations of the Israelites?"

Small Group Discussion (25-30 minutes)

- **Break into small groups** or discuss as a whole group.
- **Discussion Questions:**
 1. Why do you think it's easy to put our hope in worldly solutions (leaders, celebrities, governments) instead of God?
 2. How do we discern between holding onto values faithfully and becoming rigidly uncompromising?
 3. What might it look like to allow Jesus to refine us, as Malachi describes?
 4. How can we stay focused on God's mission while we wait for answers or deliverance?

Application Activity: Personal Reflection on Waiting and Refining (15-20 minutes)

- **Individual Reflection:**
 - Ask participants to write down one area of life where they feel tempted to compromise or lose hope while waiting on God.
 - Have them write one step they can take to align more closely with Jesus' mission (e.g., comfort someone who is hurting, advocate for justice, or encourage others).

- **Pair and Share:**
 - If comfortable, participants can share their reflections with a partner for encouragement and accountability.

Group Reflection and Takeaways (10-15 minutes)

- **Discuss as a Group:**
 - “How can we resist the temptation to compromise or give in to frustration while waiting?”
 - “What does it mean to let Jesus purify us today?”
- **Encourage Practical Steps:**
 - Serve someone in need this week (following Jesus' mission in Isaiah 61:1).
 - Reflect daily on God’s promises and pray for patience and refinement.

Closing Prayer and Final Thoughts (5-10 minutes)

- **Summarize Key Points:**
 - Waiting is hard, but God calls us to faithfulness.
 - While we wait, Jesus is with us, refining us for His purposes.
 - We are called to live out God’s mission, even as we wait for the final fulfillment of His promises.
- **Close with Intercessory Prayer**

Allow the class to share any praises or concerns they have. Make a prayer list to keep track of them. Close the class by praying over the praises and concerns the class named.

In Between, part 4

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Isaiah 49:5-7



Introduction

God's 400-year official silence in between the Old and New Testaments was a pause that prepared the world for the most important Word God would ever speak—the Word made flesh, Jesus the Christ. John 1:14, "So the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and

faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son."

We will celebrate the birth of that precious Word, Jesus, this week at Christmas. But we have one more Sunday of Advent to go. And so today, we will look at the last 100 years of the intertestamental period and consider the various factions that developed before Christ was born—factions that we read about in the Gospels that bitterly divided God's people—and we will contemplate the bitter divisions in our own times as we wait for Christ to come fix our divided world.

Isaiah 49:5-7

⁵ And now the Lord speaks—

the one who formed me in my mother's womb to be his servant,
who commissioned me to bring Israel back to him.

The Lord has honored me,

and my God has given me strength.

⁶ He says, "You will do more than restore the people of Israel to me.

I will make you a light to the Gentiles,
and you will bring my salvation to the ends of the earth."

⁷ The Lord, the Redeemer

and Holy One of Israel,

says to the one who is despised and rejected by the nations,

to the one who is the servant of rulers:

"Kings will stand at attention when you pass by.

Princes will also bow low

because of the Lord, the faithful one,

the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you."

God's Chosen People

Israel is often called God's chosen people. Some think this goes back Moses, because God sent Moses to deliver Israel from slavery in Egypt and lead them to the Promised Land.

God's choice of Israel goes back even further to

Abraham, because God chose Abraham and said, "Leave your homeland and go to a land I will show you and I will make you the father of a great nation. You won't even begin to count all your descendants. And you will be a blessing to all the nations of the earth. God chose Abraham because he was a man of faith who believed God, even when it seemed impossible.

But really, God's choice goes all the way back to creation. God chose to create people. He didn't need people, but He chose to make people so they could enjoy the beautiful world He created and experience God's love and love Him too.

God loves all people. He doesn't create some for destruction and some for salvation. God created all people in hopes of sharing love. And so, in this sense, God chose all people to be His people, but we are so stubborn and sinful we turn away from Him.

But God chose Abraham, because he was a man of faith, to be a blessing to all the nations and help people everywhere repent of sin and come back into a love relationship with God.

And from Abraham, came Israel, a people who were to be a blessing. Israel was to be a kingdom of priests who brought all people back to God. Unfortunately, Israel became puffed up by their status and blessings as God's people. They became proud and only wanted to satisfy their own selfish ambitions and build their own kingdom instead of seeing to God's mission to bring the whole world back to God.

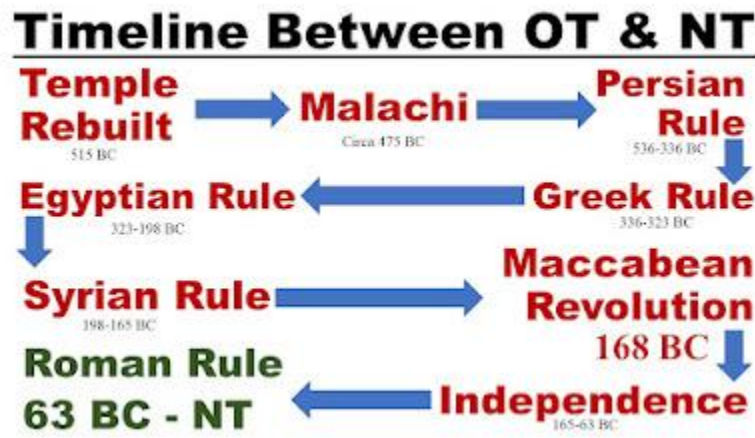
Israel began to suffer the consequences of their selfishness and idolatry. little by little, their kingdom eroded away until they oppressed and were conquered by foreign empires. And in their distress, they cried out for a Messiah to save them. God said in Isaiah 49:6, I "will do more than restore the people of Israel to me. I will make you a light to the Gentiles, and you will bring my salvation to the ends of the earth."

Isaiah 49:5-7

⁶ He says, "You will do more than restore the people of Israel to me.

I will make you a light to the Gentiles, and you will bring my salvation to the ends of the earth."

America seems more divided today than it ever has been. We could learn a lot from the history of Israel's mistakes during the intertestamental period. If ever there were a divided people, it was Israel by the time Jesus was born.



Israel Between the Old and New Testaments

From the 500s BC until the birth of Christ, Jerusalem was ruled by a succession of foreign empires. First, the Persia ruled Israel and allowed the Jews to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple. Then, Alexander the Great lead Greek Empire to

conquer Persia and take control of Israel. However, Alexander the Great died unexpectedly and his empire shattered into four smaller kingdoms--Macedonia, Pergamum, Ptolemaic Egypt, and Seleucid Syria. And so, Israel was then ruled by Greek Egypt followed by Greek Syria. Then the Maccabees revolted against Syria and a brutal revolution led to a brief period of independence when the corrupt Hasmonean kings ruled Israel. Then, in 63 BC, the Roman Empire from the west marched into Jerusalem and took over.

All these wars and devastations and instabilities gave rise to many different political and religious groups in Israel—each one believing they knew what was needed to make Israel great again. Let's look at these various groups.



The Pharisee and the Sadducees

The Pharisees and Sadducees were both active political parties—backing different leaders and giving allegiance to various different foreign influencers through the intertestamental period.

Because the Greek Empire had been so successful in the Mediterranean world,

people everywhere realized the Greeks had some really good ideas. Therefore, people in many different countries adopted Greek ideas about government, military, philosophy, and even religion. This process of becoming more Greek was called Hellenization.

Most people realized, if you wanted to get ahead in life and the global world, you needed to be more Greek. The Sadducees welcomed Hellenization in Jerusalem and it helped

them rise in social status. However, the Pharisees wanted Jews to remain pure. They didn't want any foreign cultural or religious influences seeping into Judaism. The Pharisees were the scribes who copied the Torah. They believed the Bible faithfulness to the Law of Moses was the way to make Israel great again. So, they set about teaching the Law on the streets and encouraged everyone to follow it perfectly.

While the Pharisees were loyal to the Torah, the Sadducees were loyal to the Temple. They believed what everyone needed was to worship God with sacrifices in the Temple. They were the priestly class who controlled the coveted and lucrative positions of the Temple order, including the position of High Priest.

The Pharisees believed in resurrection in the afterlife. The Sadducees were "sad you see" because they didn't believe in resurrection. They believed there was no life after death; this life is all you get. So, they wanted to make the most of *this* life--earn all you can, gain as much power and influence, and enjoy the comforts of this life--because it's all you get. The Pharisees, on the other hand, believed you should be willing to sacrifice your life for the sake of faithfulness to the Torah because God would reward you in the next life.

The Pharisees were seen as the party of the people, because they could be seen out in the streets teaching the Law to the common person. On the other hand, the Sadducees the elite upper crust of society, wealthy, holding high positions, and were always in the exclusive temple.

Pharisees were very pious, trying to follow God's law perfectly. For example, they refused to work on the Sabbath and even forbid people to have too many tacks in their sandals on the Sabbath because walk around with too many takes might be considered carrying a heavy load, which would be work. The Sadducees, on the other hand, saw religion as a mean to get ahead. They were often quite corrupt, using their political and religious positions for gain, selling appointments for bribes, cheating people with unfair exchanges in the temple, and getting rich off the people's tithes and offerings.

<u>The Herodians</u>	<u>The Zealots</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Supported the Herodian dynasty•Cooperated with Rome•Killed their own people to preserve Herodian rule•Tyrants	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Wanted to restore Davidic rule•Militantly oppositon to Rome•Killed their own people to restore David's Kingdom•Terrorists

The Herodians and the Zealots

Another bitter division was between the Herodians and the Zealots. When Rome marched into Jerusalem in 63 AD, they installed Antipater as their puppet king in Jerusalem. When Antipater died, his son, Herod the Great, became king in 40 BC. Herod was a ruthless and savvy king. He murdered all his Jewish rivals

including his sons, his wife, her 2 sons, her brother, her grandfather, and her

mother. This is the same Herod the Wisemen visited in Matthew chapter 2 when they were looking for the infant Jesus, which led Herod to order the murder of every baby in Bethlehem under 2 years old.

Most people loathed Herod, but he was a savvy political leader who skillfully walked the fine line between being the political leader of Judea and a puppet king for Rome. Herod's rule divided Judea further between two opposing groups—the Herodians and the Zealots.

The Herodians supported Herod's rule. Herod was not of the line of David, Israel's royal line from of old. However, the Herodians supported Herod's dynasty as the new royal line of Israel. They also sought to preserve Israel's autonomy by cooperating with the Roman's. They believed rebellion against Rome was futile and would lead to Jerusalem's destruction.

The Zealots were a militant political party that opposed the Herodians. The Zealots passion for the national and religious life of the Jewish people led them to despise Rome and even Jews who sought peace through cooperation with the Roman authorities. The Zealots' fiery nationalism meant they hated the Herodians. They wanted to fight violently for Jewish independence. They were even willing to resort to terrorist attacks, assassination, and killing their own people to restore David's Kingdom, which they saw as God's Kingdom.



The Essenes

With all the division and strife in Israel's broken world before Christ, many had given up on this world altogether. Have you ever felt like that? Have you ever felt: "This world is just too dark, too evil. I don't even know how to live in this place. I just wish I could run away to a lonely mountain and live as a

hermit." Or maybe you think, "I'm too social to be a lonely hermit. I'll join a commune with a bunch of other truly good people, and we'll turn our backs on this evil world and start over and make our own good world, where there will be peace and love and happiness."

That was how the Essenes felt before Jesus came.

The Essenes were the "preppers" of the ancient world. They wanted to leave this world behind. They realized the systems of this world were so broken, there was no hope for the world to be found in kingdoms and empires and political factions. Even the established religious systems seemed broken beyond repair. They rejected the Temple in

Jerusalem as corrupt as well. So, they abandoned it all and moved away, out into the wilderness. They wanted to learn how to farm the land and be self-sufficient so they didn't have to depend upon markets and systems and governments of this evil world.

We have the Essenes to thank for the preservation of the Dead Sea Scrolls. While they were caching away food for their communities in caves in the Judean wilderness, they also saved the Holy Scriptures. One day in 1947, a shepherd was wandering through the Judean hills. He picked up a rock and threw it into the mouth of a cave and heard something inside smash. When he investigated, he found a clay pot with an ancient scroll inside. It was an ancient copy of the Prophet Isaiah. People often wonder, "How do we know if the Bible we have today hasn't changed from what was ordinarily written?" Well, in the Dead Sea Scrolls, we see many of the ancient biblical texts, over 2,000 years old, and they are the same as the texts we read in our Bible's today. Thank you, Essenes!

Many scholars also believe John the Baptist was either an Essene or deeply influenced by their religious movement. And it seems very plausible. John the Baptist lived in the wilderness, ate locusts and wild honey, and dress in animal skins (many similarities to the Essene's ascetic lifestyles as monks). The

The Essenes wanted to forget about the world. The world could go to hell; the Essenes wanted to start over from scratch. But by retreating from the world, the Essenes abandoned God's mission for Israel to be a light to other nations. God doesn't want the world to go to hell. God wants to save the world. God did not send His Son to condemn the world, but to save it (see John 3:17).



Conclusion

This was the broken and divided world into which Jesus was born. He came to bring light into the darkness and to show God came to save ALL people.

God's Kingdom is not just for Jews or Jerusalem or Israel. God's Kingdom is for ALL nations.

And God's Kingdom is not of this world. In other words, it doesn't operate by the politics and principles of worldly Kingdoms. It is not won by political maneuverings or by the might of a sword. God's King is a baby born in a manger and His Kingdom is won by a cross.

It breaks my heart to look around at our broken world—divided between so many factions. And everyone thinks their way is the only way. And I feel great kinship with

the Essenes, sometimes, and those who want to leave it all behind and move to a remote cabin in the wilderness and just forget about this broken world.

However, God's call for His people today is the same as it was in Isaiah 49:6, "I will make you a light to the Gentiles, and you will bring my salvation to the ends of the earth." And Jesus said in Matthew 28:19 – "Go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit."

I believe Christ is coming again, just as He came 2,000 years ago. But when Jesus comes again in final glory, our Messiah will finally bring His Kingdom on Earth and all that is wrong will be made right. In the meantime, in the waiting, I will do His work on earth. I will take up my cross and follow Him.

And I hope you will too.

Session 4 Leader's Guide

Greeting – Welcome participants, make announcements, and handout material for the next class.

Opening Prayer – Thank God for the chance to study together and pray for wisdom.

Scripture Reading and Overview (10-15 minutes)

- **Read Isaiah 49:5-7 aloud.**
 - **Highlight Key Themes:**
 - Israel's calling to be a light to the nations.
 - God's mission to bring salvation to all people.
 - The Messiah's humble path contrasted with worldly expectations.
- **Ask:** "What stands out to you in this passage about God's plan for salvation?"

Brief Teaching: The Divisions in Israel (15-20 minutes)

- **Summarize the Factions in Israel During the Intertestamental Period:**
 1. **Pharisees and Sadducees:** Divided over tradition vs. Hellenization, Torah vs. Temple, and views of the afterlife.
 2. **Herodians and Zealots:** Cooperation with Rome vs. violent resistance.
 3. **Essenes:** Withdrawal from society to avoid corruption.
- **Connection to the Gospels:** How these factions reappear in Jesus' time and challenge His ministry.
- **Ask:** "Do you see parallels between these ancient divisions and divisions in our world today?"

Small Group Discussion (25-30 minutes)

- **Break into small groups** (or remain as a whole group).
- **Discussion Questions:**
 1. Which of the factions described resonates most with you—Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians, Zealots, or Essenes? Why?
 2. How can we avoid falling into the trap of thinking "our way" is the only right way?
 3. In what ways do we see factions and division among Christians today? How can we work toward unity?
 4. What does it mean for us to be a "light to the nations" in today's world, as described in Isaiah 49:6?

Application Activity: Living as a Light to the World (15-20 minutes)

- **Reflection Exercise:**
 - Ask participants to write down one practical way they can act as a light to others this week—whether by promoting unity, serving someone in need, or sharing God’s love.
 - Invite participants to share their action steps with a partner for encouragement and accountability.
- **Ask:** “How can we balance standing firm in our faith with being peacemakers in a divided world?”

Group Reflection and Key Takeaways (10-15 minutes)

- **Discuss as a Group:**
 - “What are some ways we can work toward unity in the Church and beyond, even when we disagree?”
 - “How does Jesus’ mission in Isaiah 49 and Matthew 28 inspire us to live differently?”
- **Encourage Practical Steps:**
 - Commit to serving someone outside of your usual circle this week.
 - Pray for opportunities to be a light in difficult situations.

Closing Prayer and Final Thoughts (5-10 minutes)

- **Summarize Key Takeaways:**
 - Factions and divisions can distract us from God’s mission.
 - We are called to bring light to the world and work toward unity, even in the midst of differences.
 - Jesus offers us a path of peace, humility, and service as we wait for His return.
- **Close with Intercessory Prayer**

Allow the class to share any praises or concerns they have. Make a prayer list to keep track of them. Close the class by praying over the praises and concerns the class named.

Bonus Sermon: When Help Finally Comes

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Luke 2:1-20



Introduction

Throughout the four weeks of Advent, we've studied the 400 years of scriptural silence between the Old Testament and the birth of Christ in the New Testament. Nothing was added to the Bible from completion of Malachi in 475 BC until Matthew tells us about Jesus. God's people had to wait 400 years for the Messiah to come and save them. And then Jesus was born.

God sent Jesus to save the whole world, but the Messiah wasn't what most people expected, and God's salvation didn't look the way people thought it would. It went unnoticed by many. Only the humble parents of a baby boy, a few shepherds working the night shift, and some truly wise men noticed when God broke His 400-year silence and Jesus was born.

Maybe you've been waiting for something. Are you waiting for an answer from God?
Are you waiting for the solution to a problem?
Are you waiting for healing or happiness or wholeness or heaven?
Are you waiting for something else?

Sometimes when you wait a long time your help comes but it doesn't look the way you expect. You might even miss it. Tonight, as we recall the glory of Jesus birth, I want to share three things to expect when God's help finally comes.

Luke 2:1-20

¹ At that time the Roman emperor, Augustus, decreed that a census should be taken throughout the Roman Empire. ² (This was the first census taken when Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³ All returned to their own ancestral towns to register for this census. ⁴ And because Joseph was a descendant of King David, he had to go to Bethlehem in Judea, David's ancient home. He traveled there from the village of Nazareth in Galilee. ⁵ He took with him Mary, to whom he was engaged, who was now expecting a child.

⁶ And while they were there, the time came for her baby to be born. ⁷ She gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no lodging available for them.

⁸ That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. ⁹ Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were terrified, ¹⁰ but the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. ¹¹ The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! ¹² And you will

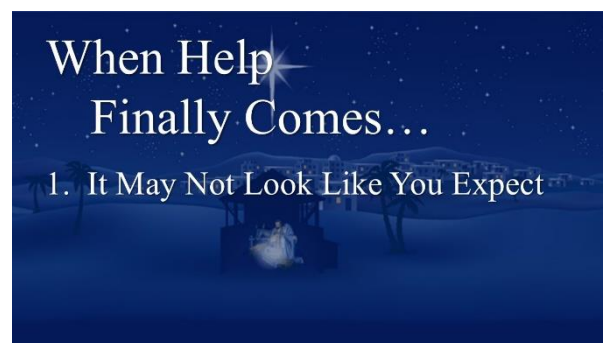
recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger.”

¹³ Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others—the armies of heaven—praising God and saying,

¹⁴ “Glory to God in highest heaven,
and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased.”

¹⁵ When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, “Let’s go to Bethlehem! Let’s see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

¹⁶ They hurried to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger. ¹⁷ After seeing him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child. ¹⁸ All who heard the shepherds’ story were astonished, ¹⁹ but Mary kept all these things in her heart and thought about them often. ²⁰ The shepherds went back to their flocks, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. It was just as the angel had told them.



When Help Finally Comes, It May Not Look Like You Expect

When help finally comes, it may not look like you expect. For 500 years, the Israelites were dominated by a succession of foreign Empires. First there were the Persians, then the Greeks, then the Egyptians, and then the Syrians. A Jew named Mattathias Maccabeus lead a brutal revolt in 167 BC that led to 100 years of tenuous independence, before Israel was reconquered by

the Roman Empire.

It’s no wonder the Israelites expected a Messiah to come who would be a great military leader who would fight the Romans and reestablish Israeli independence and rule as a mighty king, this time from the royal line of David. What other kind of help could successfully rid Israel of her oppressors?

After 400 years of silence, God finally spoke His Word of Salvation, the angels cried: “I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. ¹¹ The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! ¹² And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger.”

Clearly, the angels were talking about God’s Messiah who would save Israel. But the Messiah would save not only Israel; He would save the whole world. And the angels were talking about a baby, not a conquering king. A baby? What help can a helpless baby give?

Well, maybe this baby would grow up to be a military leader. But when we study Jesus’ life, the help He gives doesn’t look at all like the conquering heroes of the past. In fact, Jesus said things

like: “Turn the other cheek...” and “Love your enemies...” and “If a [Roman] soldier demands that you carry his gear for a mile, carry it two miles.”^{vi}

So clearly, Jesus is not a military man. He *is* a conquering King, but His Kingdom is not of this world and Jesus conquers by dying on a cross and forgiveness. Yet here we are over 2,000 years later and we are celebrating the birth of Christ. Everyone knows His name and what he did. Hardly anyone knows about Mattathias Maccabeus or Pompei or even Alexander the Great. The world doesn’t celebrate their birthdays, nor do we mark the centuries of history according to when they were born. No, we mark it by Christ’s birth. And so, we live in the 2,021st *Year of Our Lord*, Jesus. 2021 AD. So, remember, when God sends help, it may not look like you expected, but God’s help will far exceed your expectations. So, view your problem and God’s help through the eyes of faith. You are not abandoned, and God’s solution is better than you imagine.

The first step in receiving God’s gracious help is surrendering to His plan. You can keep chasing your own selfish dreams. But no matter how successful you are, you will never experience the richness and fullness of God’s eternal plan for you until you give up you own plans, take up your cross, and follow Christ. Perhaps today is the Day you decide to follow Him.

When Help Finally Comes...

1. It May Not Look Like You Expect
2. It May Be Painful

When Help Finally Comes, It May Be Painful

When help finally comes, it may be painful. Giving birth is one of the most beautiful experiences of human life, but is also one of the most painful. Ask any mother who’s been through that pain; I’m certain they will tell you it was worth it.

I can’t help but admire Mary when I think of her giving birth to Jesus. Mary lived in a time

before modern medicine. There were no epidurals or pain medicine. She was probably only about 13-years-old (the age most girls were married in her day). And she gave birth to the Messiah in a stable surrounded by farm animals. And yet, I’m sure she would say, “It was worth all the pain.”

Mary’s pain didn’t end with childbirth. It returned as a deeper ache every time she feared for her son’s safety. And finally, it was like a sword piercing her very soulⁱⁱ when she saw her precious son hanging on a cross.

And yet, when we consider how Jesus’ death conquered the sins of the world and led to salvation for all His followers, I’m still sure Mary would say, “It was worth all the pain.”

When God sends His help, it may be painful, but it is worth all the pain. So, trust God and know that He will be with you through all the pain and have faith that “what we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory he will reveal to us later.”ⁱⁱⁱ

When Help Finally Comes...

1. It May Not Look Like You Expect
2. It May Be Painful
3. Some People May Not Like It

When Help Finally Comes, Some People May Not Like It

When help finally comes, some people may not like it. People don't like change if it threatens their way of life. Even if their way of life is broken or wrong or unjust, they will fight to defend their little piece of the pie. And if your rescue disturbs their routines, they may not like you either.

When Jesus was born, Herod the Great was king of Judea. I say he was king, but that's a misnomer. Herod was a puppet for Rome. Caesar in Rome was the one pulling the strings, but Herod carved out his own little piece of the Judean pie and he ruthlessly defended it. Herod murdered anyone who threatened his position—including his own sons, his wife, her 2 sons, her brother, her grandfather, and her mother. And when the Wisemen came looking for Jesus—the newborn King of the Jews—Herod murdered every baby in Bethlehem under 2 to protect *his* evil kingdom.

This self-preserving resistance to God's only begotten son was repeated throughout Jesus' life. People in power—whether it was Herod, the Romans, the Pharisees, or the High Priest—felt Jesus threatened their way of life. And they would rather cling to their broken kingdoms than welcome God's perfect Kingdom Jesus want to bring on earth. So, they crucified Jesus, thinking they would get rid of him. But you can't stop the will of God. And Jesus rose from the grave and His Kingdom is coming. In fact, it is imminent. Everyone must decide to accept or reject Jesus as Lord.

If you've accepted Him and follow Him, He is bringing His Kingdom to earth *in you*. And when His Kingdom starts to grow *in you* and you begin to change and you turn away from the ways of this world, some people will not like it. Jesus warned this would happen. He said in John 15:20, "Since they persecuted me, naturally they will persecute you."

When God sends His help, some people may not like it, but you must be faithful to Christ. What good is it to gain the whole world but deny Christ and so lose your own soul?

Conclusion

And so, we must look for God's help to come. It may not look the way we expect, and it may be painful, and some people may not like it, but God's help and salvation and way and Kingdom are the best of all. So tonight, I plead with you, to welcome Jesus, the newborn King, the Defeater of Death, the Redeemer of Life, the Lord of Salvation, the Prince of Peace, the Bringer of Light, Emmanuel, God with Us, Welcome Him as *your* King and receive His Kingdom in your life.

[End with Holy Communion & Candlelight Ceremony]

¹ Matthew 5:39, 5:44, and 5:41

² Luke 2:35

³ Romans 8:18