

The Silence of God

The Gospels

Between Malachi & Matthew

Introduction

We are leaving a study of the Old Testament and beginning a study of the New Testament. To do so in one quick move would be difficult because there is too much to understand between the book of Malachi and the book of Matthew. In fact, if you were reading through the Old Testament and finished Malachi, chapter 4, verse 6, and then, continued to the first verse of the first chapter of Matthew, you would read of strange things and strange people. The truth is that between those two verses, there has been four hundred years. The world has literally changed between the last part of Malachi and the beginning of Matthew.

Today, I want to introduce the world of Jesus Christ and especially, how it was brought about with such brilliant, divine strategy. It will seem like a history class at first, but it will all fit as we continue. These facts will make the New Testament so much more meaningful as we read about people like the Pharisees, the scribes, the Herodians, the Sanhedrin, the high priests, and others. It will help us understand the synagogue, which is the institution that was created in the Babylonian exile when the Israelites would read and interpret the scripture. It will help us understand many things that were in evidence during the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. These things will impact His life with great force, so it will help us to know who and what they are and why they existed.

Today then, we are going to take a look at all that God had done during this four hundred years of time. In fact, it is called “four hundred silent years”. The reason for that is because there has been neither prophet nor inspired writer during this time. For four hundred years, the main question in the hearts of the Jewish nation is, “Where is God?” And, for four hundred years, it seems that God does not care enough to answer.

One of the main things I want for us to gain today, is a greater sense and a greater confidence that even though God may be silent in our lives, He is still sovereign.

The Silent Years

Turn in your Bible to Galatians, chapter 4, verses 4 through 5a. These are the only verses we will look at today. Paul writes these words,

But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law . . .

Underline the phrase “when the fullness of time came”. One commentator wrote that God had prepared the world for the coming of Jesus Christ, so that the phrase “when the fullness of time came,” could be translated, “when the time was just right” or “when the time was perfect”.

Do not forget, ladies and gentlemen, that we are going to look at a period of time today, that meant, for four hundred years, God was silent. The Jewish nation grew during that time. People were born into that nation and died, without ever hearing the voice of God; without ever reading a new writer; without ever hearing the voice of a new prophet. God’s voice was quiet.

Jewish historians refer to this period of time as, “the dark period”. This was because they were without, it seemed, God’s revelation.

Most importantly, I want for us to understand that even though God has been silent, He has been moving; He has been manipulating; He has been working; He has been overshadowing the nation. He has done this so that, when Jesus Christ came, the time was perfect and the stage was set for all things to fit together for the coming of the Messiah.

Three Political Powers During the Silent Years

Now, let me set the stage for you historically. There are three periods of political power that are dominant during the four hundred year period.

The Power of Greece

1. The first political power that is dominant during the four hundred years of silence is the nation of Greece.

The leader of this first political power of Greece was catapulted into such a powerful position because his father, Philip, was assassinated. This man, in less than a decade, would transform the face of the known world. By the time he was thirty-two, he would have earned, and rightly so, the name, Alexander the Great. He had, however, much more of a purpose in mind than just conquering the world for Greece. He wanted to begin, and he did, a cultural revolution – the Greek Revolution. He wanted to unite the world under Greek culture.

Alexander the Great made one lasting contribution, even though he, prematurely it seemed, at thirty-two years of age, died. Yet, God had used that kingdom to not only overthrow the Persian rule, but to institute one major contribution that would speed the gospel on its way. Do you know what that contribution was? The Greek language.

Now, prior to the tower Babel, everyone understood each other. After that point in time, however, until Alexander the Great came to power, it was difficult to communicate from city to city and nation to nation. Then, Alexander the Great conquered the world and taught everyone the language that the scriptures would be written in; the language that the gospel of the Messiah would be delivered through – the Greek language.

History records that Alexander the Great marched on Jerusalem to conquer it and Jaddua, the high priest, with a procession of white robed priests, walked out of Jerusalem to meet this young conquering hero, and to ask for clemency. Alexander, and no one is sure why, gave them clemency. In fact, he sacrificed to Jehovah and asked that the prophecies that he had heard about from the book of Daniel, be read to him. He did this because the book of Daniel prophesied that a Greek ruler would conquer the Persian world – Alexander himself. He gave the Jews citizenship in his Greek cities and did much for the people, as he unified them under Greek culture.

As kind as the first ruler of the Greek world was, however, so angry and bitter was the last ruler. His name was Antiochus Epiphanes. He was a man who conquered Jerusalem and walked in and sacrificed a pig on the altar. He massacred the priests. He sold Jewish women and children into slavery. He took every manuscript he could find and burned it and then, executed the owner. He was determined to

stamp out Judaism and make these Jews think Greek, and it seemed that he was succeeding.

The Power of the Maccabees

2. Like a flash of brilliant light, however, the second period of political power comes into play. It was started by an old high priest, named Mattathias, and his son, Judas Maccabeus.

Maccabeus means, “the hammer,” and was a Hebrew title given to this son. The high priest and his sons would eventually, conquer the Gentile Greek forces in Jerusalem and begin what would be a hundred year period of independence.

This was the independence of Israel and what a wonderful time it was. The Israelites re-instituted the orthodox sacrifices. They rebuilt the wall that Antiochus Epiphanes had destroyed. They once again, reveled in the scriptures that they had somehow been able to preserve.

During this time, Palestine was divided into the five sections that we read about in scripture: Galilee, Samaria, Judea, Trachonitis, and Perea. When Jesus Christ comes to planet Earth, Palestine is divided into these areas, and I am sure there was strategy in God’s mind for that.

The Power of Rome

3. For one hundred years then, the people of Israel experienced wonderful independence. However, sixty-three years prior to the birth of Jesus Christ, another world ruler comes to power, by the name of Pompey. He represented the Roman government and conquered Jerusalem.

Now, let us back up for a moment because you are looking at me like I used to look in history class when I had just had my fill. We, first, have the Greek power that instituted one major contribution to the coming of Christ; that is, the Greek language, through which the gospel would be spread and nations would be able to understand the early apostles and missionaries. Then, secondly, we have the independence of Israel as they grabbed it back from the Gentile forces for a hundred years. The major contribution was a renewed sense of hope. The people once again believed, “Maybe, Israel can reign. Maybe, we can have a nation, a state where the Messiah can rule.”

The hopes of the Israelites were then dashed by a man named Pompey, who came and destroyed their Citadel and instituted what was then, the Roman world; the conquering nation; the government that would sweep through the land like no other power prior to that time.

Factions under Roman rule

It is during this time, under the Roman rule, that a number of factions emerge. Some of them were pro-Rome; that is, they were all for Rome leading Judaism, and some were anti-Rome; that is, they desired and craved for the independence of Israel, just as the people of Israel do today.

Sadducees – pro-Rome

- First, there were the Sadducees that were pro-Rome.

These were the liberal Jews that did not believe in miracles; did not believe in the resurrection; did not believe in angels. These were the religious liberals of that day. The unfortunate thing is, the Sanhedrin, also pro-Rome, was filled with Sadducees. You can understand now, why Jesus would not have a whole lot of impact with the Sanhedrin or the Sadducees, since they did not believe in miracles and thought there had to be a logical explanation for everything. So, if you wrest miracles away from the Old Testament scriptures, you have taken half of it away.

Publicans – pro-Rome

- Another group that was pro-Rome were the publicans.

It is no surprise that this faction was pro-Rome because, if you were a publican living in that day, you went to the nearest political office and purchased, with money you had saved, the right to turn around and tax your fellow Jew. That made you a very popular person! The problem is, not only would they tax the Jewish nation and turn the money over to Rome, they would also over-charge and pad their own pockets. Zaccheus was a publican and Matthew, one of Jesus' disciples, was one of these turn-coats as well. They were pro-Rome; they were happy that Rome ruled.

Herodians – pro-Rome

- Finally, also pro-Rome, there were the Herodians.

Obviously, this faction took their name from Herod the Great. They felt that Israel should hold hands with the state of Rome and they did not want anything or anyone to upset the delicate balance of power. Rome would certainly leave Israel alone, up to a point; they would not bother Israel or make any waves. So, they were called the Herodians.

Scribes – anti-Rome

- Now, there were anti-Rome factions as well, and the first were the scribes.

The reason the scribes were anti-Rome was because they craved the independence of Israel and they treasured the scriptures that they had. When Antiochus Epiphanes was destroying people for owning manuscripts, the scribes were hiding them and facing a martyr's death. They were known as the doctors of the Law. The scribes were the copyists; the translators; the interpreters; the teachers. These people loved the Law and dedicated their lives to interpreting the Law. Unfortunately, they went too far and added to it. Gamaliel, one of the well-known scribes, was the teacher of young Saul, who would one day be the apostle Paul.

Pharisees – anti-Rome

- Then, there were the Pharisees, who were also anti-Rome.

The Pharisees were a rather unusual lot. They were the separatists. In fact, "Pharisee" means, "separatists". They were the descendants of the early Maccabees and wanted to separate from Rome. The problem was that, in their separation, they separated themselves from their fellow Jews.

Now, you often see the scribe and the Pharisee together because of their adherence to the Law; their love for the Law; their love for separation from Rome; their craving for the independence of Israel. Unfortunately, both the Pharisee and the scribe went too far. So, by the time of Jesus Christ, they were not interested in anyone who did not adhere to all of their additions to the Law.

Let me give you some examples of their additions. There is one Law, among the ten in the Old Testament, that says you have to rest on the Sabbath day, and every Jew knew that. By the time of Jesus Christ, however, the scribes and the

Pharisees had added thirty-nine categories to that one simple Law. A few illustrations include:

- One category was “no burden bearing”. They delineated that to such a point that, by the time of Christ, a tailor could not pick up his needle and a scribe could not pick up his pen, as that would be bearing a burden.
- Another category was “no unnecessary labor on the Sabbath”. By the time they delineated that one, they wrote, and we have the manuscripts to read, women were encouraged, on the Sabbath day, not to look in a mirror, lest they be tempted to pluck an eyebrow. I read that and thought that was interesting. Women have been plucking their eyebrows for two thousand years! It is amazing what Eve did in the garden without a pair of tweezers!
- “No plowing” was also a category. They delineated that to the point that you could not drag a chair across the floor of your living room because the leg of that chair might make a rut and you would be guilty of plowing.

Is it any wonder that Jesus Christ “rattled the cages” of the scribes and the Pharisees when He said, “The chief aim of man is to love God and love your neighbor”?

I find it fascinating that the Pharisees, anti-Rome, and the Herodians, pro-Rome, and the Sadducees, pro-Rome, would all get together. These snakes and skunks would somehow find themselves compatible for one purpose – to destroy the voice and the life of Jesus Christ.

Now, Rome made one lasting contribution, and that is, their systems of travel that allowed the known civilized world to be inter-connected. This allowed the early disciples to speed on their way to the furthest corners of the Roman Empire with the gospel. Also, Rome contributed their system of law. The apostle Paul, against the backdrop of Roman law, will teach major doctrines of scripture. He uses Roman law to explain the doctrine of adoption. He uses the Roman law system, or Bema seat, to explain the doctrine of justification. He uses Roman citizenship to illustrate the doctrine of citizenship. Contributions were great from Rome, so the gospel came.

The Silence Is Shattered

Finally, after four hundred years, three political periods of time, each contributing a certain thing, the time was perfect and the silence of God was shattered by the birth of a little boy. Finally, after years of silence, the scripture tells us, in John, chapter 1, “. . . the Word was with God, . . . and the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

God’s lips had been silent and now, after four hundred years, the silence had been shattered by the birth of Jesus Christ. And the scripture says that when He came, the time was just right.

Now, we are going to be going through the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. This will make a significant difference in our understanding as we read about these people, and we will illustrate further as we go.

Three Truths From the Silent Years

Before we finish, however, I want to conclude with three thoughts. There is much more than a history lesson in this. Even in the silent years, there is so much to learn. God has given us a wealth of truth between Malachi, chapter 4, verse 6, and Matthew, chapter 1, verse 1.

There is one issue, ladies and gentlemen, that I find myself, as a pastor, answering more than any other issue. There is a question that I hear believers ask more than any other question. If there is a primary issue that all of us, as believers, deal with, it is this issue – the silence of God. We ask, “Where is God? Why don’t I hear from God?”

Perhaps you are listening today and the main issue on your heart is, “Why doesn’t God speak?”

I want to give three thoughts that I have learned from the silent years of the Jewish nation that are directly applicable to where we are today.

During the silence of God, His presence remains unaltered

1. The first thought is that during the silence of God, His presence remains unaltered.

You cannot see God. The nation could not see Him. They wondered where He had gone and why He did not speak. And yet today, we can look back on four hundred years when God was there. His presence had never been altered.

John Paton and his wife left Scotland in the last century. They landed on the New Hebrides Islands, which were inhabited by cannibals. They were not there but for a few weeks when Paton's wife and child died. Paton writes in his journals that he lay on their freshly dug graves for three or four nights, so that the cannibals would not steal into the night, dig up their bodies, and eat them. He wrote that as he was lying on the grave, he had one question, "Where in the world is God?"

I imagine as Antiochus Epiphanes took the priests, took women and children and sold them into slavery, and executed thousands of the Jews, that the nation was crying out, "Where is God?"

God was there. His presence had never changed.

I think of Paul and Silas serving God, as recorded in Acts, chapter 16. What does it get them? A good beating and a free night in jail. About midnight, what were they doing? Praising and singing. You may have heard that story since you were in kindergarten Sunday school, but have you really heard it? There they were at midnight, having served God, and they received a beating and a jail sentence. Then what happens? What would you do? I know what I would do. I would kick those stocks as hard as I could and say, "Thanks a lot, God!"

Now admit it, when you serve God and difficulty comes, the first thing you wonder about is the presence of God. If you learn anything today, learn from four hundred years that God never abandoned Israel. Never!

During the silence of God, His promises remain unchanged

2. Secondly, during the silence of God, His promises remain unchanged.

This would be hard to believe. He promises:

- in Hebrews 13:5b – ". . . I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you." Do you believe that?
- in Philippians 4:19 – ". . . God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus." Can you believe that?
- in Romans 8:39 – ". . . [nothing] will be able to separate us from the love of God . . ." Do you believe that?
- in Romans 8:28, paraphrased – "Everything according to His design works together for

your spiritual benefit." Everything! Can you believe that?

Someone wrote, "We do not live on answers from God, we live on promises from God."

It may help you to know that His promise to Israel that they would have the land and that they would be protected, ultimately, as a nation, had never been abrogated. The promise was still theirs.

During the silence of God, His power remains unhindered

3. Thirdly, and finally, during the silence of God, His power remains unhindered.

When God is silent, it is easy to question, "Has God's hand been shortened? Is He without power? Could He not have stopped that?"

When we say that God is sovereign, ladies and gentlemen, that is a ten cent theological word. What do we mean? Let us bring sovereignty down to where we are. Sovereignty means that God never says, "Oops!" or "Uh-oh!" or "If I had that to do over again, I would do it differently."

God is sovereign. He knows all the variables; He has all the designs mapped out; He knows everything.

A couple of weeks ago, I was getting the kids ready for bed. One of my delights in the evenings, and I will admit, one of my chores too, is to get the kids ready for bed. Candace, who is now three, has decided that she is old enough to pick out her pajamas. I found that out in a rather embarrassing way in that, when I picked her pajamas out, she looked at me like I was crazy. You can tell by the look in her eyes that she would not be caught dead in that nightgown. So, I let her pick her pajamas now.

One evening, I said, "Candace, go pick out your pajamas."

She said, "No, Daddy," and then, mumbled something.

Around our house, you do not get away with that. So, I said, "Candace, I'm not sure what you are saying, but Daddy has spoken, so you go pick out your pajamas."

Then, tears came to her eyes and she said, "No, Daddy," and it sounded like she was saying, "I don't want to."

So, I got out of my chair and administered a direct swat. She broke out in tears and I could tell there was more hurt than anything else, but I was impatient and she was not obeying and it was late. I

said, “Now young lady, you have heard me and if you don’t want more of the same, you go pick out your pajamas.”

She still hesitated. She only does that to her mother; she always obeys me! She continued to hesitate until I started after her. She turned on her heel and ran down the hallway, with me right behind her, angry. Then, there she stood, pointing to the light switch that she could not reach. She had been trying to tell me, not “I don’t want to,” but, “The light is not on,” and she was afraid of the dark.

You do not have to look at me like that! That was not one of my high points as a father. I did what you would have done, I got down on my knees and took her into my arms and said, “Candace, Daddy is so sorry. I’m impatient and instead of trying to understand you, I spanked you. I am sorry. I was wrong. Will you forgive me?”

She said, “Yes, Daddy.”

Your Father, your heavenly Father, never, never, never will come to you and say, “I made a mistake. I didn’t know all the facts. I really blew that one.”

That is because He is sovereign. Even when He is silent, He is sovereign. Believe it! Believe it to the glory of God.