



Time Between Times

A narrative about what happened when God's voice was silent.

THE BIBLE

Daniel 7-8, Zechariah 9:9
+ extra Biblical sources

Prepare for the Story

ICEBREAKER

- If you could live in a 'sitcom' world. Which TV show would you choose and why?
Is there a specific character you would prefer to play?

Rewind the Story

Can someone highlight what has happened in the story so far ...

- The Fall of Judah – Jeremiah & King Zedekiah
- Daniel – Advisor to Kings & Lion Tamer
- Queen Ester – For Such a Time as This
- Homecoming – Nehemiah & Ezra

Hear the Story

Scene One: Four Hundred Years of Silence

While most of God's people remained in exile, the remnant rebuilt Jerusalem. Although they desired for the wonder and splendor to return to the land, the problem was their hearts had not changed.

Most of the people ignored God's prophet Malachi, so after his death, the prophetic voice fell silent in Judah, and the land held its breath, waiting for the future leader that God had promised, a Messiah who would put Jerusalem and God's people back on the map.

Four hundred years would pass between God's work in the Old Testament and the New Testament. Four hundred years of silence. No prophets or visions. No miracles or angels would make an appearance. During those years, a handful of the faithful Israelites continued to seek Yahweh's presence, and they relied on the words of the prophets of old, which had been recorded for them, to tell them where God's Story was headed.

Scene Two: Daniel's Visions

During these years, the people often read the visions that Daniel had received while he was in exile in Babylon. One of those visions had to do with four strange beasts. In this vision, Daniel saw a great storm churning on the surface of the sea, with chaotic winds blowing in every direction. Then, four beasts came up out of the water, each different from the others.

After he saw these creatures, Daniel saw someone he described as looking like a human but was more than human, supernaturally moving with the clouds toward heaven. This man approached God, who was sitting on His throne, and God gave this "god-man" authority, glory, and power. All nations and people worshipped him in every language – and God gave him the power to rule that would not fade away. He promised Him a Kingdom that would never be destroyed.

All of these images overwhelmed Daniel, so he approached the throne and asked what was the meaning of these visions. He was told, *"The four great beasts are four kings that will rise from the earth. But the holy people of the of God will receive the kingdom and will possess it forever."*

Daniel recalled that the first beast looked like a lion with an eagle's wings. As Daniel watched, its wings were pulled off, and it was left with its two hind feet standing on the ground, like a human, and it even began to act like a human.

This first beast represented King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. The transformation from a beast to a human-like status was meant to reflect the events that happened in Nebuchadnezzar's life. And Daniel recalled the events of King Nebuchadnezzar's life, because he was serving Nebuchadnezzar's grandson, King Belshazzar of Babylon, when he received this vision.

The second beast was like a bear. It was raised up on one of its sides, and it had three ribs in its mouth between its teeth. This beast was instructed to eat until its belly was full. This beast represented the Medo-Persian Empire. The three ribs in its mouth represented the nations that were devoured by it. The Persian Empire conquered the nations of Lydia, Babylon, and Egypt.

During Daniel's lifetime, he would watch as the Medo-Persians moved about the world stage. First, they conquered Lydia in 547 B.C. Then Daniel had a front-row seat, as Babylon was conquered in 539 B.C., and he transitioned from serving the King of Babylon and then began to serving the King of Persia. He was still alive and a part of the administration that conquered Egypt in 525 B.C. So, Daniel also experienced the events of this part of his vision during his lifetime.

Scene Three: The Third Beast - Greece

The third beast Daniel saw looked like a leopard, except it had four bird-like wings on its back and four heads. At the time, Daniel had no idea what this image meant. Daniel would die around the year 515 B.C. But the image given to him wouldn't play out for nearly another two hundred years. But those faithfully reading the words of the prophet in the scriptures could see that God had already told them what was to come.

The third beast represented Greece, an empire that grew under the skilled military leadership of Alexander the Great. The Grecian empire expanded rapidly, conquering vast amounts of territory. In Daniel's vision, the wings of this creature represented the unprecedented rapid expansion, and the four heads of the creature predicted the four-way division of the Empire following Alexander the Great's Death.

On another occasion, Daniel was given another vision – this time – the picture was that of a Ram. The ram that Daniel saw had two long horns and, at first, was standing beside the river.

What made this Ram unique is that one of the horns was longer than the other. As Daniel's vision unfolded, this ram pushed everything to the west, to the north, and to the south out of his way. No one could stand against him or help his victims. He did whatever he wanted, and nothing could stop him.

While Daniel was watching, the ram, suddenly, a goat appeared from the west; it was moving so quickly that its hooves didn't appear to touch the ground. The goat had one very large horn right between its eyes, and it was heading directly for the ram, rushing at him in a rage. The goat charged furiously at the ram and struck him, breaking off both of the ram's horns.

Now, the ram was helpless, and the goat trampled him. The ram that once seemed unstoppable was now replaced by the goat. Then the goat grew more and more powerful, and as it grew, its horn fell off and was replaced with four horns pointing in four directions.

As Daniel watched this all unfold and tried to understand its meaning, someone approached him, and he heard another voice say, "*Gabriel, tell this man the meaning of his vision.*" Daniel was terrified and fell face down on the ground as Gabriel approached. Then the angel Gabriel said, "*Son of man, you need to understand the events you have seen in your vision. I am here to tell you what will happen in the future.*"

"The two-horned ram represents the kings of Media and Persia. The goat represents the king of Greece, and the large horn represents the first king of the Greek Empire. The four other horns that replaced the large horn reveal that the Greek Empire will break into four kingdoms, but none as great as the first."

And just like Daniel's previous visions, this one also came true. When Alexander died in 323 B.C., his generals dismantled his empire, and for the next one hundred and fifty years, the region saw each of them jockey for control – often with God's people and Judea in the middle.

The territory was treated like a pawn of a trophy but was largely able to govern itself. During this time, the people dreamed of the day that God would send their leader, the Messiah, to lead the nation back to days of prosperity.

Scene Four: The Fourth Beast – Rome

The final beast in Daniel's vision was the one that terrified him the most. He described it as a beast with bronze claws and large iron teeth. It crushed and devoured its victims, trampling everything that got in its way, and on its head were ten horns.

When Daniel asked about this beast, he was told, *"The fourth beast is a fourth kingdom that will appear on the earth. It will be different from all the other kingdoms, and it will devour everything in its path. The ten horns are ten kings who will come from this kingdom. God's people will be delivered into its hand for a time, but its rule will not last."*

This beast represents the Roman Empire, a mighty kingdom that indeed crushed all its foes.

Scene Five: "The Mad King"

Around 190 B.C., the Romans overtook the Grecian Empire, and the defeated ruler sent his son as a hostage to Rome. The boy's name was Antiochus IV. Years later, he would return from Rome, ruling over Judea for the Roman Empire. He became one of the cruelest men the region had seen, referring to himself as "Antiochus Epiphanes" – meaning "the manifest god." And that's exactly how Antiochus IV viewed himself.

Historians describe his character as volatile and unstable. The Greek historian Polybius, playing off his self-chosen title of Epiphanes, gave Antiochus the nickname Epimanes, meaning "mad," thus giving him the moniker of 'The Mad King'.

What Antiochus sought more than anything was to succeed where his father had failed. He wanted to create an unstoppable dynasty. Those who refused to be fully assimilated under his rule, such as the Jews, were considered a threat and were dealt with accordingly.

So, in 169 B.C., he attacked the city of Jerusalem and looted the Temple. Two years later, he came back to the city – and attacked it again on the Sabbath. This time, he killed and enslaved innocent men, women, and children. Additionally, the city walls, which had been rebuilt during the time of Nehemiah and Ezra, were demolished, and he built his own military outpost in the city.

To further exert his control, he made all Jewish faith practices illegal and outlawed the reading of the scriptures. To make it even worse, to rub his rule in their faces, he did the unthinkable. Antiochus went into the temple and desecrated it, by building an altar to Zeus inside the Temple, right on top of the altar of burnt offerings. It was there that he sacrificed a pig in the name of Zeus.

Scene Six: Maccabean Rebellion

This incident pushed the Jewish people to their breaking point. They revolted against Antiochus IV. The family who led this rebellion was known as the Maccabees. And their efforts – and guerilla-style warfare – secured Jewish independence for almost a hundred years.

The Jews who ruled during this time were recognized by Rome, but their era of rule was troubled by constant war with their neighbors, political infighting, murder, terrorism, and conflict between the religious parties of the day.

Eventually, Rome had enough, and in 63 B.C., the famous general Pompey the Great re-established Roman authority in Jerusalem with a decisive victory. For the next one hundred years, Roman soldiers were stationed in Jerusalem.

Scene Seven: Cultural Landscape of First Century Judea

Under the watchful eye of Rome, Herod the Great became governor of Galilee and later ruler of Judea. As king, Herod controlled not only the political life in Judea but also the important office of the High Priest.

During the first century, there was no agreement among the people on what to do about the Roman occupation. Some Jews believed the best response was to obey God's laws, have as little to do with non-Jews as possible, and wait for God's Messiah to deal with the Romans. The Pharisees were a group that held this view.

What set the **Pharisees** apart was their strict adherence to the laws – things like purity rituals, dietary restrictions, and Sabbath regulations. These views and practices made it difficult to have normal social contact with non-Jews. They invested incredible energy in studying the Laws of Moses, and in the process, they developed their own rules, customs, and laws to prevent them from ever breaking the Law.

A group who saw the times differently was the **Sadducees**. This group was largely comprised of only a few of the richest priestly families. They favored the rule of the Roman-appointed “Jewish Kings,” so they held great political power. They controlled the high priesthood and the temple and benefited personally from its treasury. Religiously, they rejected the tradition of the Pharisees and held a much more tolerant and expedient attitude toward non-Jews with whom they shared life.

While the Sadducees dominated the temple and the ruling council – finding their power in titles and prestige. The Pharisees were endorsed by the people, giving them enormous influence. These two groups both sat on the national ruling council of the Sanhedrin and were forced to tolerate and work with each other.

While these two religious and political parties dominated the cultural landscape of the Judean first century, they were not the only groups of consequence.

The **Essenes** were like monks – they lived in male-only communities and abstained from sex and other forms of physical indulgence. They maintained their devotion to God through strict separation from the world. Their number grew as the poor and powerless would give them sons to raise. Herod thought favorably of the Essenes and held them in high esteem, and even had a working relationship with the leader of the group.

While the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes found non-violent ways to navigate the Roman occupation, the **Zealots** felt compelled to go a different direction. They believed that it was against God’s law to submit to a non-Jewish ruler, and while they followed the same practices of the Pharisees, they were not content to wait for the Lord to act to remove their Roman oppressors.

The Zealots felt called to the instruments by which God would accomplish his purpose. So, they embraced the violent terror-based practice, which they believed would usher in God’s Kingdom and remove the Romans from the land.

The world of the first century was diverse in religious and political opinion. Some waited patiently for God’s promised Messiah, as Malachi had promised hundreds of years before. Others had compromised with their oppressors, deciding to make the most of the situation.

Some felt the best path to creating God's Kingdom was by removing themselves from the corrupt world and focusing on purity and piety. While others believed it was their calling – their God-given mission – to create the Kingdom of God by force.

This is the world in which the prophecy of Zechariah would come true. *"Rejoice, O people of Zion! Shout in triumph, O people of Jerusalem! Look, your king is coming to you. He is righteous and victorious."* This is the world in which God, who had been silent for four hundred years, chose to put on skin and show His people what it looked like to build His Kingdom here.

Retell the Story

- What promise did God give to His people through Malachi?
- How long was the period of silence?
- How did God's people look for God during this time?
- What did Daniel's vision of the four beasts represent?
- What happened during the rule of Antiochus IV?
- How long did the Jews gain independence after that Maccabean rebellion?
- In the first century, what key religious/political groups were there?
- What did Zechariah promise would happen?

Discuss the Story

- What is your first reaction to this story? How did this story make you feel?
- What stood out to you from this story? What did you notice for the first time?
- What were some things from this story that made you wonder?

- How does it feel to have a period of 400 years of silence, where God doesn't interject or intercede in His story? What do you make of this?
- What's your first reaction to God giving Daniel a vision that would cover the events of world History for over four hundred years? (*Nebuchadnezzar 562 BC – Antiochus IV-164 BC*)
- What do you think about the accuracy of the visions that Daniel received?
- What do you think drove Antiochus IV to provoke the Jewish rebellion? What must it have been like for the Jews living during that one hundred years of national autonomy?
- What stands out to you about the different groups that formed based of their response to Roman oppression?
- Did you hear anything that reminded you of previous stories?
- From this story, what did you notice about humans?
- What else are you noticing about God from this story?

1) A LITTLE TOO QUIET

Throughout the Old Testament, we see the pattern of God speaking to His people and brief periods of quiet. What makes this part of God's story unique is the four hundred years of silence. Why do you think God would cease sending angels, performing miracles, and speaking through prophets during this period? What purpose could silence have had for the people of Israel? How might God use silence in your life?

2) PROPHETIC WARNING

The visions of Daniel serve as a great road map for God's people during the four hundred years of silence. Read Daniel 2:24-48 as a group. What parallels do you see between this vision and the one about the four beasts? Why do you think God used prophecy in the Old Testament?

3) CHOOSE YOUR PARTY

The landscape of the first century was full of diverse opinions. The Pharisees were waiting for God's Messiah and were trying desperately to keep God's laws. The Sadducees and all but given up on God's promises and had begun to work with the Romans to make the best of a bad situation. The Essenes removed themselves from society so they could be as holy as possible. And the Zealots took matters into their own hands and chose to launch God's Kingdom by force.

Which of these responses is most like you? Do you tend to take matters into your own hands? Do you go with the flow and make the best of bad situations? Do you isolate yourself from those you disagree with, or are you waiting on God to do something while you focus on the things you can control?

What is good about your preferred method of response? And what about your response might be a weak point?

Pray

God,

Sometimes, Your silence speaks. Thank You for the prophecies that You shared with Daniel and with others, that remind us that Your hand is always in control. Help us remember that truth, even when it things are well beyond ours. As we try to build Your Kingdom here, remind us that people respond in different ways to the world around them. Give us Your eyes to see – the words to say and the things to do – to help our neighbors find and follow You. Amen.