

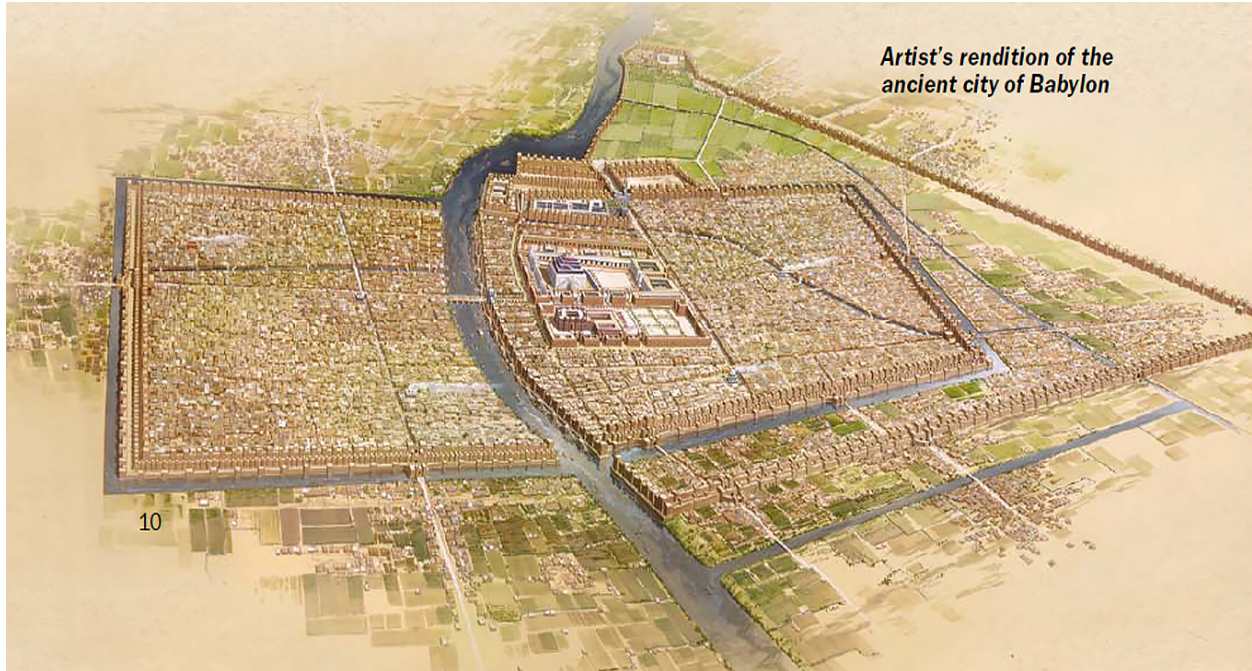
Last week Keren and the boys and I went to the dance studio to watch Addie's ballet recital. It was so sweet to see my little 4-year-old and some of her friends from this church put on their dancing shoes and tutus and twirl around with huge smiles on their faces. During the recital, Hudson was sitting on my lap, and he whispered in my ear: "Dad, in all the world, how many ballet performances have been better than this one?" I said, "I don't know, son." He said, "Hundreds and hundreds and hundreds." He wasn't wrong, but we're trying to work on the gift of encouragement in our house!

We all come from a family. Matthew begins his gospel by telling us about the family of Jesus. We've already spent two weeks in the genealogy. Let's dive into week 3.

After the exile to Babylon: Jeconiah was the father of Shealtiel, Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel, Zerubbabel the father of Abihud, Abihud the father of Eliakim, Eliakim the father of Azor, Azor the father of Zadok, Zadok the father of Akim, Akim the father of Elihud, Elihud the father of Eleazar, Eleazar the father of Matthan, Matthan the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, and Mary was the mother of Jesus who is called the Messiah. (Matthew 1:12-16)

The challenging part of preaching from this section is that it covers hundreds and hundreds of years, and we know almost nothing about any of these people. Most of them lived during a time when no books of the Bible were being written. So instead of talking about the people in this list, I want to focus on how God was at work during this stretch of time to prepare the world for Jesus. Go to Malachi, the last book in the Old Testament. You'll notice there is blank page between Malachi and Matthew, the first book in the New Testament. That blank page represents 400 years. For four centuries, the Bible is silent, but that doesn't mean God was slumbering or absent. Galatians 4:4-5 says, "But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship." Paul says that God sent Jesus into the world when the set time had "fully come." At the perfect time, at just the ideal moment—that is when Christ came into the world. Today, we are going to talk about why it was the perfect time and how God was at work behind the scenes to make that happen. Week 1 we talked about how **God prepared a family for the Messiah**; last week we talked about how **God prepared a kingdom for the Messiah**. This week we will focus on how **God prepared the world for the Messiah**, and all the ways the global stage was set from the closing of the Old Testament until the birth of Christ.

Let's begin with the Babylonian kingdom. These are the people who conquered the Jews, destroyed their temple, and took them into exile. They had a dominant empire, and they presumed their capital was impenetrable. The Greek historian Herodotus claimed that "Babylon surpasses in wonder any city in the known world" and specifically praised the walls, which he said were 56 miles long, 80 feet thick, and 320 feet high.



Artist's rendition of the ancient city of Babylon

As you can see, their capital was built right on the Euphrates River. No one could conquer this city, or so it was thought, until one night in 539, through an engineering marvel, the Persian army dammed up and diverted the river north of the city, causing the river to dry up, and they walked in and overtook the city in a single day. (Which, by the way, is exactly what God foretold would happen in Daniel 5.)

The Persian Empire released the Jews, allowed them to return to Jerusalem, and even paid to finance the rebuilding of the city. The Persians ruled for roughly 200 years, until Alexander the Great rose to power in Greece. During his early teenage years, Alexander was mentored by Aristotle, one of the greatest philosophical minds in history. At the age of 20, after his father was assassinated in 336, Alexander took over his father's kingdom. He consolidated power, raised an army, and began marching east, committed to expanding Greece's reach throughout the world. In a shocking and unprecedentedly short period of time—just a few years—he conquered and controlled over 2 million square miles. When he came to the Promised Land, to Israel, he encountered resistance and fighting up north, so as he progressed south to Jerusalem, he anticipated having to destroy the capital, killing the men and selling the women and children as slaves. That was the plan. This had the potential to be one of the most pivotal moments in the history of God's people. Everything that had been building for 1500 years could come crashing down at this very moment.

But as Alexander was approaching Jerusalem, prepared to demolish it, the high priest came out, along with all the other priests, all dressed in their ceremonial regalia. Many of the people of the city came out to greet Alexander, all wearing white. Alexander remembered that years before, he had a dream that he thought was from heaven, in which a man looking just like the high priest, wearing the exact same clothes, surrounded by the exact same kind of people, all dressed the same way, appeared to him. So Alexander approached the leader of the Jews, and instead of taking out his sword, he went up and bowed his knee and saluted the high priest. Ancient artists have created countless depictions of this fateful meeting.



As this painting shows, the High Priest brought out the Book of Daniel, the Old Testament prophetic book written over 200 years before, in which God foretold that an empire would rise up with the power of a leopard, swiftly spread across the world like a bird of prey, and overtake Persia. This was a prophecy about Alexander the Great, which he realized instantly! Because of that one meeting that was preceded by a miraculous dream and included biblical prophecy, Alexander the Great decided to extend peace to the Jewish people that lasted for generations!

The Greek empire changed the world and changed history. The entire western world began to speak the same language. The Old Testament of the Bible was translated into that language and became broadly distributed throughout the world. Jews moved freely all throughout the world, settling in different cities and towns and building synagogues, houses of prayer and worship, where they studied the Scriptures and shared with their local communities about the God who made heaven and earth. That is going to be important, so hold onto that.

Alexander the Great died at the young age of 32, having never lost a battle. Because he was so young and spent most of his life on military campaigns, he didn't have any children yet. He had a brother and a son who was yet to be born; it was assumed that one or both would rule in his place. But Alexander's four most prominent military commanders, those who actually ruled the troops, divided the empire up into four regions, each getting their own kingdom, and they killed Alexander's son and brother. This very thing was prophesied in the book of Daniel:

Then a mighty king will arise, who will rule with great power and do as he pleases. After he has arisen, his empire will be broken up and parceled out toward the four winds of heaven. It will not go to his descendants, nor will it have the power he exercised, because his empire will be uprooted and given to others. (Daniel 11:3-4)

Two hundred years before it happened, God said it would happen.

So the Greek Empire was divided into four kingdoms, and the Seleucid kingdom governed the area the Jews called the Promised Land. Most of the Seleucid leaders did not honor the protections bestowed upon the Jews by Alexander the Great. They had a specific leader, Antiochus IV, who had great disdain for the Jews. The book of 2 Maccabees was written about the year 150 BC by Jews living in the Promised Land, suffering under Antiochus IV's reign. 2 Maccabees is part of the Apocrypha, a historical document that is not in the Bible, is not inspired by the Holy Spirit like the Bible, and isn't intended to be preached from like the Bible, but is an important document that can give us a lot of important information about historical events. As this book tells us, on December 16, 167 BC, Antiochus came into the Jewish temple, set up a statue to Zeus, and then went to the altar in the temple and sacrificed a pig to Zeus. It was the most obnoxious and offensive way to defile the temple. Antiochus went to a Jewish family that had seven sons and told them they had to eat pork, which was symbolic of rejecting their God and embracing his. The oldest son said, "We would rather die than turn our back on the God of our ancestors." That enraged Antiochus, so he had fires started with enormous kettles on top of them. Then his men went to that older brother, cut out his tongue, scalped his hair, and cut off both hands and feet, throwing all those items into the kettle. Then, "after the young man had been reduced to a helpless mass of breathing flesh, the king gave orders for him to be carried over and thrown into one of the pans. As a cloud of smoke streamed up from the pan, the brothers and their mother encouraged one another to die bravely" (2 Maccabees 7:5). He went to the next oldest son and gave him a chance to eat pork or die; he chose to be faithful to his God. The next son, same choice, all the way down to the youngest son, who had just watched his six brothers tortured and executed. Antiochus went to the youngest son and wanted to make him an example for all the Jews. He pleaded with him, "You don't have to die like your brothers. Eat the pork, and not only will I let you live, but I will also give you riches, I will make you famous, I will give you a position in my kingdom, with power and authority." Antiochus looked at the man's mom and tried to convince her to persuade her son to save his life. She agreed, but then in Hebrew, which the king didn't speak, she said to him,

I do not know how your life began in my womb, I was not the one who gave you life and breath and put together each part of your body. It was God who did it, God who created the universe, the human race, and all that exists. He is merciful and he will give you back life and breath again, because you love his laws more than you love yourself. Don't be afraid of this butcher. Give up your life willingly and prove yourself worthy of your brothers, so that by God's mercy I may receive you back with them at the resurrection. (2 Maccabees 7:22-23, 29)

Before she could even finish talking, her youngest son said to the king: "My brothers suffered briefly because of our faithfulness to God's covenant, but now they have entered eternal life. But you will fall under God's judgment and be punished as you deserve for your arrogance. I now give up my body and my life for the laws of our ancestors, just as my brothers did. (2 Maccabees 7:30, 36-37)

This same sort of evil was happening throughout the nation of Israel. One of Antiochus' generals went to a town called Modine, set up an altar, and asked Mattathias, the priest in the town, who had five sons, to offer a sacrifice to the Greek gods. He refused, but another Jew stepped up to make the sacrifice. Mattathias grabbed a weapon, killed the Jewish traitor, and killed the general, then he and his sons began a guerrilla warfare battle against Antiochus. That war lasted for three years, and the Jews won. They finally took back Jerusalem. As soon as they did, they tore down the defiled altar to Zeus, built a new one in its place, and began making sacrifices again to the one true God. This is what the Jewish celebration of Hanukkah celebrates—the retaking and the rededicating of the temple during a time of intense persecution. The Jews fought back and won their freedom and their country! This shaped the religious practices of the Jewish people during the time of Jesus. The Pharisaic movement was born at this moment in history. The Pharisees, who are prominent throughout the life and ministry of Jesus, who we will mention nearly thirty times throughout Matthew's gospel, appeared in response to these events. They

didn't start out as legalistic curmudgeons who wanted to put a wet blanket on the faith of sincere worshippers; they started out wanting to see the entire nation of Israel passionately committed to worshipping the one true God. They believed that when all of Israel was faithful to the scriptures, God would deliver them from their oppressive and evil pagan overlords and return them to national prominence and glory. That's how the movement started, but as time went by, they began to protect their own interests and love their traditions more than they loved God. Instead of helping people, their teachings hurt them and distorted their understanding of God.

Fast forward about one hundred years, and an ambitious young general named Julius Caesar was consolidating his power throughout Rome. He took his army, crossed the Rubicon, entered the capital, declared himself emperor, and then pursued his adversary, Pompey, all the way to Egypt. It was there that Caesar made a very rare technical error and found himself under siege in Alexandria. He was likely going to be killed. But the High Priest of the Jews at the time, John Hyrcanus, learned of the situation and sent a detachment of over 3,000 soldiers, who fought to lift the siege and save Caesar. Because of that, when Julius Caesar took over all of Rome, like Alexander the Great before him, he offered widespread, blanket protection for the Jewish people. Every other conquered nation had to pray to Caesar and worship Roman Gods, but the Jews were allowed to worship their God and pray to the one true God on behalf of Rome.

Julius Caesar and his adopted son brought the *pax Romana* (the peace of Rome) to the Mediterranean world. Before that time, travel was dangerous; there were gangs on the roads and pirates at sea. Even Julius Cesar himself, when he was 25 years old, was kidnapped by Sicilian pirates, who put a ransom out for him. When they told Caesar they were asking for \$600,000 in silver, he laughed and said they were fools and they should demand \$1,500,000. The ransom was eventually paid. After Caesar was set free, he raised a small army, went back to the island where he was held captive, took back all the money, and eventually had all the pirates crucified. Julius Cesar and Augustus got rid of pirates and gangs all over the empire, so for the first time in the history of the world, it was safe to travel. To facilitate travel, they built 250,000 miles of roads throughout the empire, including 50,000 miles paved with bricks and stone, which allowed people to travel, move about freely, and communicate as never before in the history of the world.

Julius Caesar had acquired so much power and control that even his friends thought it was dangerous, so on the Ides of March, 44 BC, they assassinated him. Augustus, his adopted son, through a long series of events such as fighting against Marc Antony and Cleopatra, took over the empire. He ruled Rome for over fifty years. During that time, he wanted to find out the population size and the taxation potential of the empire, so he commissioned a census. For that census, everyone was required to go to their hometown, register their name, property, and occupation. It was that very census that took Joseph and Mary from Nazareth to his father's hometown of Bethlehem, where Jesus would be born. How incredible, that Caesar Augustus, who claimed to be a man who had become a god, unknowingly orchestrated the events to fulfill prophecies that were written hundreds of years before his time about God becoming a man, born to a virgin, born to save the world.

There were four hundred years during which the prophets were silent, but the invisible hand of God was at work, setting the stage to fulfill dozens and dozens of promises God had made about the Messiah! Scripture, written hundreds of, sometimes over a thousand, years before Christ, tells us that:

- Jesus would be born of a virgin (Isaiah 7:14).
- Jesus would come from the line of Abraham (Genesis 22:18), and more specifically be a descendant of Judah (Genesis 49:10), and even more precisely come from the household of David (2 Samuel 7:12).
- Jesus would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2).
- At his birth Jesus would be presented with gifts from leaders who traveled from distant lands and would bow down to him (Psalm 72:10).

- An evil king, to protect his throne, would kill the babies of Bethlehem (Jeremiah 31:15), but Jesus' family would escape to Egypt for safety (Hosea 11:1).
- The coming Messiah would claim to be God with us (Isaiah 7:14), and he would be a prophet (Deuteronomy 18:18), a priest (Psalm 110:4) and a king (Psalm 2:6).
- Jesus would begin his ministry in Galilee (Isaiah 9:1).
- Jesus would perform many miracles (Isaiah 35:6).
- Jesus would teach in parables (Psalm 78:2).
- Jesus would enter Jerusalem on a borrowed donkey (Zechariah 9:9).

More than 20 prophecies were fulfilled in one day on the day of his Crucifixion!

- Jesus would be betrayed by a friend (Psalm 41:9) for thirty pieces of silver (Zechariah 11:12) and that silver would be thrown into God's house and used to buy a potter's field (Zechariah 11:13).
- In the hours before his death, Jesus would:
 - Be abandoned by his friends (Zechariah 13:7).
 - Be accused by false witnesses (Psalm 35:11).
 - Stand silent before his accusers (Isaiah 53:7).
 - Be mocked by those around him (Psalm 22:7).
 - Be wounded and bruised (Isaiah 53:5).
 - Be beaten and spat upon (Isaiah 50:6).
 - Have his garments split up and gambled for (Psalm 22:18).
 - Physically stagger under the weight of his affliction (Psalm 109:24).
- At his death he would have his hands and feet pierced (Psalm 22:16).
- His side would be pierced (Zechariah 12:10).
- He would be executed together with criminals (Isaiah 53:12).
- He would experience great thirst (Psalm 69:21).
- He would pray for his persecutors (Isaiah 53:12).
- Despite great physical travail, not one of his bones would be broken (Psalm 34:20).
- He would die at midday and during the hour of his death darkness would miraculously descend upon the earth (Amos 8:9).
- He would then be buried in a rich man's tomb (Isaiah 53:9), after which he would be resurrected to the father's right hand (Psalm 16:10-11) and he would pour out gifts on his followers (Psalm 68:18).

The grass withers and the flowers fade, but the Word of the Lord endures forever! The Lord is always at work! All throughout the Old Testament, God promised to send his Son. The Old Testament closed, but the hand of God was still at work, preparing the way for Jesus to come into the world! Even without the prophets speaking, God was moving, setting the stage, not just for Jesus to enter the world, but for the good news about Jesus to travel throughout the world.

Between the Old and New Testaments, God was at work making available

- A global language;
- Global peace;
- Global travel;
- Bible translations; and
- Jews and synagogues throughout the world.

For the very first time in history, if a world-changing event took place, like God coming into the world to save humanity, the word could spread, and everyone could hear about it and be changed. It just so

happened to take place in Jerusalem, the one place in the entire world where Europe and Africa and Asia collided, so as many people as humanly possible could hear the news as soon as possible. Let's look one more time at Galatians 4:4-5: "But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship."