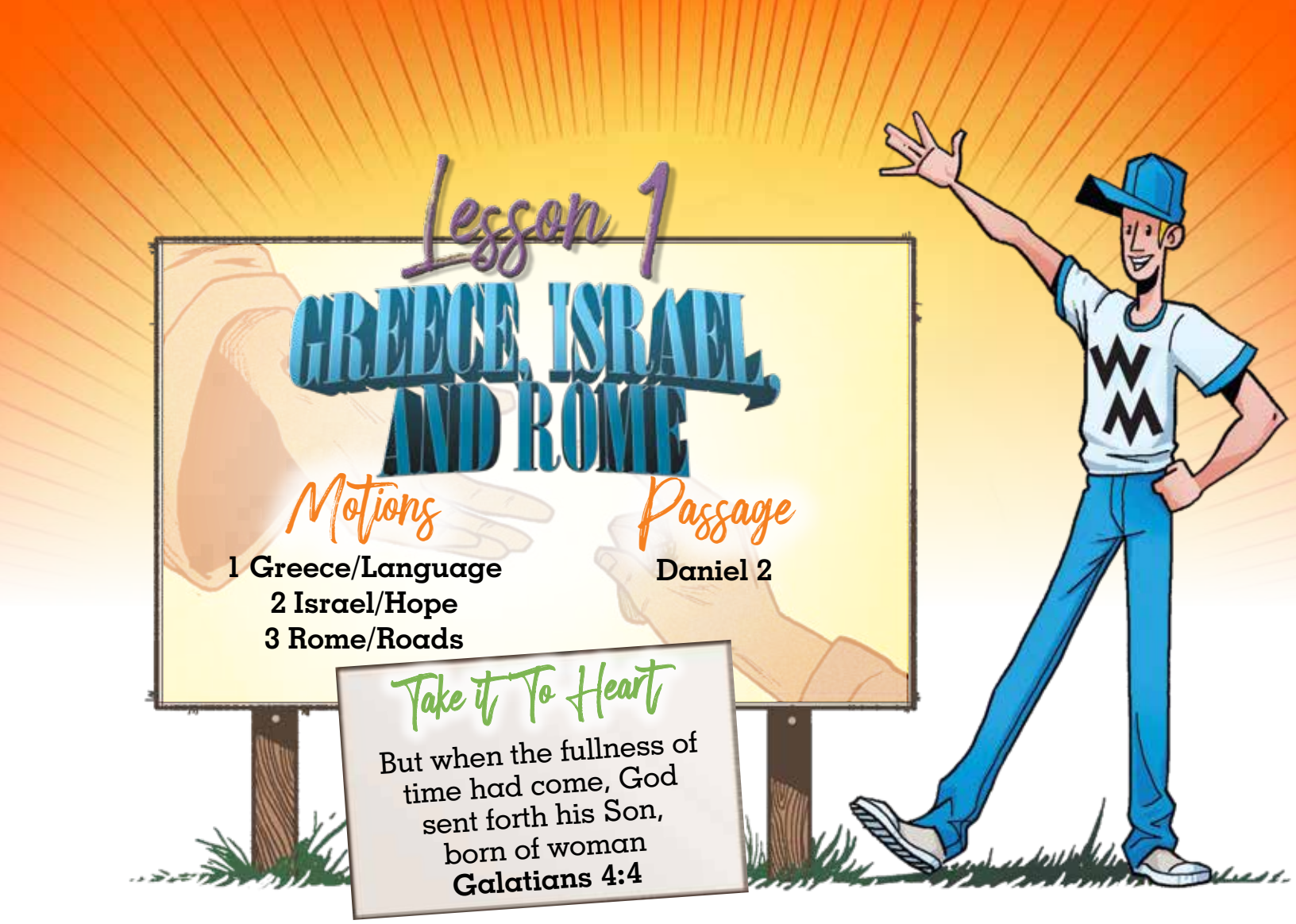


So God's story continues. The Old Testament began with these words from the book of Genesis: "In the beginning, God. . . ." Those are four foundational words. Read them again slowly. *In the beginning, God*. Before history, before creation, before time, there was only God. Even then He knew you. He knew you would sin, and He knew the terrible price He would have to pay to save you. Yet He already loved you so much that He was willing to make that sacrifice. And so He created the heavens and the earth, and the story began.

Thinking back on our study of the Old Testament, it's amazing to think about all we've already learned about God. For one thing, He spoke to His chosen people, the Israelites, through His prophets. For a thousand years, the Lord had been sending His prophets to remind the people what was expected of them: to serve their God and worship only Him. There had always been at least one prophet in the land during this time—until Malachi died around 400 BC. Suddenly, there were no more prophets. Why? Because God didn't send any! The Jewish people heard only silence from heaven for the next four hundred years.

Now four hundred years may seem like a long time to you and me, but it's no more than a blink of an eye to God. And just because there were no prophets delivering messages from God, that doesn't mean He wasn't busy working behind the scenes. In fact, He was preparing the world for something huge: the BIGGEST event in history!

This huge event is what the New Testament is all about. But to truly understand the mean-

ing and importance of this event, we must be familiar with the events leading up to this moment. Remember, the Bible is the story of God's love for mankind. The New Testament is part two of the story, which began in the Old Testament.

Like all good stories, this story has a setting, characters, plot, conflict, and resolution. Most of the story takes place in an area that today we call the Middle East. This region includes a special place we call the Promised Land because it was the land God promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and their descendants, the Jewish people.

The Jews—also called Hebrews or Israelites—are important characters in God's story, because they are His chosen people. The Old Testament characters we usually think of as "bad guys" are those who openly defy God, including Goliath, Jezebel, and the Egyptian pharaoh who enslaves God's people and refuses to let them go. The characters we usually think of as the "good guys" in the story are those who try to honor God with their lives and their choices: Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Gideon, Ruth, David, Esther, Elijah, and others.

Because the Old Testament includes a great many characters and events, the plot can seem complicated at times. But it's really pretty straightforward. Over and over God shows His love for His people. He provides for their every need, He is patient with them, He forgives their sins, and He is faithful to keep His promises to them. Sometimes, His people choose to obey. More often, they do not obey and then find themselves in an awful fix. Then they cry out to God, and in His mercy He answers them. And for a while, the people seek God and worship only Him. But their tendency is to eventually wander away from His hand of protection.

To kindle hope among the faithful, God promises to send a Messiah, a King who will destroy evil and restore righteousness on the earth. This Messiah will be the resolution to the story's conflict. He will rescue humanity from enslavement to sin and make a way for people to be reconciled with God. God's prophets tell of many signs that will mark the Messiah's coming.

By the time the Old Testament comes to a close, the kingdom of Israel has been divided in two and both nations have been displaced from God's promised land. Israel has been scattered to the winds and Judah exiled to captivity in Babylon. Although some have decided to return and rebuild under the leadership of Ezra, Zerubbabel, and Nehemiah, many choose to stay in the nations where they have settled.

And then God goes silent.

There are no new prophets, and God's people can only wait.

So what happened in the world during the next 400 years, prior to the events of the New Testament? During this time, God allowed three political powers to rise up. The first was Greece. In 336 BC, Alexander the Great began the greatest military campaign the world has ever known. He built a massive army and proceeded to conquer most of the known world, including the Persian Empire that had once conquered God's people. And so Jerusalem was now ruled by the Greeks.

Each time Alexander conquered a new land—he was never defeated in battle—he instituted a program of Hellenization, meaning that the people he defeated were required to adopt the Greeks' language and culture. Greek society had made many admirable advances in science, technology, architecture, philosophy, and the arts, and Alexander was determined to spread these achievements around the world.

In order to achieve this goal, he established community education centers in every conquered land, including Judah, or *Judea* as it was called in the Greek language. This led to Greek becoming the dominant language in the region. As fewer and fewer young people were able to read the Scrip-



tures in the original Hebrew, a Greek translation of the Scriptures known as the Septuagint was written. Later, the New Testament would be written mostly in Greek. Thanks to Alexander's schools, this common language would be key in the future spread of the gospel and God's message of love.

When Alexander lay dying, he summoned his officers and divided his kingdom among them. And so Judea fell under the rule of first one Greek kingdom and then another, and it seemed the Jews would never again control their own homeland. But in 167 BC, after a foreign king had desecrated the temple and issued a decree forbidding practice of the Jewish religion, Judah Maccabee and his brothers led a revolt of the people that succeeded in making Judea an independent kingdom once more—the second political power I mentioned earlier. The Maccabees cleansed the temple in Jerusalem and restored traditional Jewish worship. This rekindled the people's longing for the promised Messiah. They expected Him to come as a victorious warrior and powerful ruler who would restore Israel to the glory it had known under King David and King Solomon. They didn't expect a Prince of Peace.



About this same time, a third power arose in the Mediterranean region: Rome. Because the Greek forces were widely scattered to maintain their hold over the many lands conquered by Alexander, Rome was able to march on Athens and defeat Greece rather easily. Then in 63 BC, Rome captured Jerusalem and its army occupied Judea.

The Romans were also builders. Some of the most significant structures they built were roads. In fact, if you travel to Europe today you can still see the remains of some of these roads. The Romans constructed these roads as routes for moving their armies and transporting trade goods. But after establishing the church, God would use these same roads for spreading His message of love and redemption to the nations.



As you can see, the time period between the Old and New Testaments was not a time of inactivity. I like to think of it as a time of preparation. If your Bible is like mine, only one page separates the Old Testament from the New Testament. But we would need many, many more if we were to write down all that God was doing during this time. He was working behind the scenes, setting the stage for the entrance of this story's central character, Jesus Christ, and the proclamation of the gospel.

EXPLORING THE MIRACLES
Read about the creation of the heavens and earth in Genesis 1:1–2:3.



ALEXANDER THE GREAT

Do you want to know your future? Would you change how you live your life each day if you knew what the future has in store for you?

During his thirteen-year reign, Alexander the Great conquered most of the known world, including the Persian Empire, Asia Minor, and Egypt. Before Alexander was born, the prophet Daniel interpreted King Nebuchadnezzar's dream about a large statue. (You can read about the dream in Daniel 2, our Bible reference for this lesson.) Although never mentioned by name, one part of the statue represented Alexander's empire. Later, Daniel had another vision that prophesied Alexander's conquests 180 years before his birth (Daniel 11:2–4).

After many successful conquests, as Alexander approached Jerusalem, the high priest and other Jews met him outside the city's walls. They accompanied Alexander to the temple, where he read Daniel's prophesy about a mighty king from Greece. Alexander not only believed that he was the king in the prophecy, but he showed great favor to the Jewish people. He allowed the Jews to keep the laws of their ancestors and pay no taxes every seventh year. Alexander destroyed many other cities but spared Jerusalem.

God knew Alexander's purpose before he was born. God knew you and your purpose before you were born (Psalm 139:13–16; Jeremiah 1:5; Ephesians 2:10). Have you asked God what His purpose is for your life?

LET'S TALK ABOUT IT

1. When you think of the Bible as a single, epic story, what would you say is the story's main theme, the big idea that the Bible returns to over and over? Looking back at what you read in the Old Testament, what was one of your favorite stories within the bigger story?
2. Why are the 400 years between the Old Testament and New Testament thought of as a time of silence?
3. Which nations became world powers during this 400-year period? What major contribution did each of them bring to God's story as it was continuing to unfold?
4. Why do you think it is important to know that the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek during this time and came to be commonly read in this language?
5. Are you learning any foreign languages? Which ones? Do you think you might want to study Hebrew, Greek, or Latin?

Hope

Hope is an expectation of good things to come. Our culture tends to use the word hope to mean wishing for something that, more often than not, is unrealistic, as in "I hope the Great Pumpkin brings me a real, live penguin for my birthday!" But hope is only an irrational belief if the person or thing you place your trust in either doesn't exist or is incapable of giving you what you hope for.

The fact is, hoping is not very valuable all by itself. Your hope is only as good as the person or thing you are trusting. Another way of saying this is that you can hope for something with all your heart, but it will never happen if you have placed your faith in a god that does not exist.

When we say we have hope as Christians, it means we are trusting in God because He has shown Himself to be completely trustworthy and good. Therefore, we believe that what He has said will come to pass.

This is extremely important for us because we will have to wait—sometimes far longer than we want to—for the good things that God has promised. For example, we have hope that God will ultimately punish evil and bring justice, but that won't happen until Christ's return. We also have hope for eternal life with Jesus, but again, we will not experience it as soon as we would like.

But just because we must wait does not mean we are any less certain about these things. God has given us every reason to hope in the promises He has made, and He will not fail us.

The Maccabees Speak



My name is Judah, and I lived a day's walk west of Jerusalem. My father served as a priest in the holy temple in Jerusalem. He was Mattathias the Hasmonean, a direct descendant of Aaron, the first High Priest and brother of Moses.

Judea had been ruled by Greek kings for more than a century and a half, and so I grew up speaking both Greek and Hebrew. Otherwise, the Greeks left the Jews in peace, and we were allowed to walk in the ways of our God and worship Him. But some of Judea's wealthier families preferred to do away with Jewish law and adopt the worldlier lifestyle of the Greeks. This led to intrigues and power struggles that caught the attention of a new king, Antiochus IV. In response, Antiochus and his soldiers stormed Jerusalem and slaughtered 40,000 men, women, and children. Another 40,000 were sold into slavery.

The wicked king desecrated God's temple and plundered its wealth. He then outlawed our beliefs and rituals and decreed that all Jews must worship Zeus as the supreme god. But my father, Mattathias, refused. When a Greek official commanded him to make a sacrifice to the Greek gods, Mattathias killed both the Greek and the Jew who had stepped forward to obey the order. My father then fled to the wilderness with me and my four brothers. From there he called upon all Jews to stand by their covenant with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and join him in battle to take back Jerusalem. Soon after, my father took ill, but before he died, he chose me to lead the people in revolt.

For the next several years, my brothers and I waged war against the Greeks. Although we possessed few arms and even fewer trained fighters, God was with us, and we won battle after battle using unconventional tactics. At some point, the people began calling me Judah Maccabee. Some said this new name meant "the Hammer," while others said it meant "chosen by God." Whatever its origin, the name stuck and was taken up by my brothers as well.

Within three years, we drove the Greek forces out of Jerusalem and set about purging the city of statues of false gods and goddesses. We then purified the temple and rededicated it to the Lord—an occasion still celebrated on the autumn holiday you call Hanukkah. Although Judea would not win independence for several more years, the taking of Jerusalem helped to revive the Jewish people's faith in God and rekindled our longing for the promised Messiah.

NOTE: The story of the Maccabees-led revolt is told in two history books written between the time of the Old and New Testaments. Although the Jews themselves never considered the books to be scripture inspired by God, events recorded in the books of the Maccabees are so important to Jewish history that they—along with about a dozen other historical books—are sometimes included as additional study material in published Bibles. Collectively, these books are called the Apocrypha, which literally means "hidden things." Most Protestant Bibles do not include the books, but when they do, they are placed in their own section like an appendix. On the other hand, Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches accept the Apocrypha as scripture, which means that they base some of their doctrines and beliefs on these books.

Prayer

Dear God in Heaven,

You are sovereign over all of creation, including history. You spoke through Your prophets to foretell of people, kingdoms, and events to come. You have raised up heroes and villains alike and made the nations rise and fall according to Your perfect will. As I learn the history of the world, I can see that You were preparing people to recognize and believe in Your one Son, Jesus Christ. Although I was born long after these events, I know that You are at work even now in the world. I know that Your desire is for every person to know Jesus and accept Your gift of salvation. Help me to have confident hope in Your plans for me and for all who believe in Your Son.

In the precious name of Jesus. Amen.

