

This Is Jesus: Dawn of a New Day

Failure to Launch

January 21, 2018

PRE-SERVICE VIDEO

**Worship Songs – Made New / Beautiful
Name**

BTS Video

**Feature Song – Trouble Won't Go /
Offering**

Good morning everyone.

“Trouble won't go peace won't stay” ... if you were looking for a good way to describe the experience of the Jewish men and women living in the land of biblical Israel at the time of Jesus, that would be it. And not just for them but for every generation of Jewish

men and women dating back almost six centuries.

The year was 586 BC. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon had conquered what was left of the nation of Israel, destroying in the process the city of Jerusalem and its magnificent Temple:

- The place where the glory of YHWH resided.
- The place where Heaven and Earth were joined together.
- The place that reminded them that they were the “Chosen People”; a nation to represent the Lord to the rest of the world.

Following the destruction, all military, civil and religious leaders were either executed

or deported as slaves to Babylon – a distance of 700 miles across the Syrian Desert. Only the poorest of the poor were allowed to remain in what was left of their homeland.

In the years leading up to that disastrous defining moment, God had sent prophet after prophet to warn the nation to turn back from their idol worship and disobedience, but they refused. So judgment came just as He promised it would.

And yet, God was not through with Israel. For He had *also* promised that through them the entire world would be blessed and made whole. And so as the captivity in Babylon began, God sent additional prophets to encourage the remnant to settle down, build homes and raise children for the day would come when their punishment would end.

One prophet – Jeremiah – had been very specific about that. Through him the Lord said to the exiles, “After 70 years, I will come and do for you all the good things I have promised, and I will bring you home again. For I know the plans I have for you – plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”ⁱ

And sure enough, 70 years almost to the day from when Nebuchadnezzar first attacked Israel, King Cyrus of Persia overthrew Babylon and gave permission for them to return home.

And 70 years almost to the day from when Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the temple, a new one was completed in Jerusalem – although much of the city and its

surrounding walls remained unrestored.ⁱⁱ

Unfortunately, however, those two events (and the eventual rebuilding of the city) did not mark a return to the glory days of King David when Israel had been the shining jewel of the Middle East.

- God's glory did not return to their Temple as in the time of Solomon.
- And for the next five centuries, Israel was dominated by and subjugated to the major powers of that part of the world; first the Persians, then the Greeks and then, finally, at the time of Jesus, the Romans.

For all practical purposes, as I said last week, the children of Israel were still living in exile

... even in their own land. *Trouble won't go and peace won't stay.*

But hope was rising because of a unique word from the Hebrew prophet Daniel (who had lived through that Babylonian exile) which reaffirmed earlier prophecies that God would one day send a Messiah who would deliver them from oppression and become their King.

But Daniel's prophecy was far more specific in terms of timing,ⁱⁱⁱ so much so that, for about a hundred years either side of Jesus, more than a few Jewish men proclaimed that *they* were the long-awaited Messiah!

In each case, they ...

- Gathered a following.

- Organized a resistance movement.
- And then launched a military-style rebellion against the occupying forces.

And, in each case, they were executed along with many of their followers. And the movement they started died out with them^{iv}

...

- Which, of course, highlights the major distinctive of Jesus' claim to Messiahship: it didn't die out after his crucifixion.
- Which, of course, raises the question of "why not?"
- To which the most reasonable answer from all the data available is that His followers truly were convinced that He

had risen from the dead! Otherwise, they would have scattered as well and Christianity as we know it would not exist.

But that's a topic for another day. 😊

Now, the reason I'm going through all of this (*again*, for those of you who have been here for or watched online the previous two messages in this series) is that it is critical to have this historical context firmly in mind when trying to understand who Jesus was, what He did and why He did it.

As I've said pretty much every week since the beginning of December, part of the problem with Christianity these days is that

we focus so much on the miracle of Jesus' birth and the significance of his death and resurrection that we tend to minimize what He was doing in between.

And that's very sad to me because what He did and taught and modeled in His time on earth has the potential *to change everything about our world*. In fact, it already has in so many ways (which we talked about two weeks ago).

But where we are right now as a culture – so full of anger and bitterness and mistrust and even hatred of “them” (people on the other side of the political or ethnic or economic or whatever fence) – with where we are right now, we desperately need what Jesus did and taught and modeled ... because it is a better way.

I've said it a lot recently but one of the things that's consistently missing from the dialogue these days (if you can call it a dialogue) is the proposal of a better way. Everyone is an expert at pointing out who or what is wrong but no one is offering a true alternative much beyond "get rid of them."

But there *is* an alternative to which Jesus invites us. And, as I said two weeks ago, you don't even need to believe in what Christianity claims about the divinity or resurrection of Jesus to try it. After all, his first disciples didn't believe any of that stuff when they started following Him. Furthermore, *He didn't require them to.*

He just said, "A new day is dawning. The King and Kingdom you've been waiting for

all your life is near. So follow Me. Do what I say and do what I do. Try it out for yourself and you will find rest, abundance, and strength like you've never had.”^v

And many of his countrymen and women *did* follow. But many did not because, unlike the other would-be-messiahs of His era, with Jesus there was “a failure to launch.” Jesus would not allow himself to be made king – at least not in the way that the people wanted.

Actually, it was even worse than that. Jesus did something so unexpected, so culturally unacceptable that many people turned away from him (including some of his inner circle) while others (including some of his inner circle) thought long and hard about it.

John the Perplexed

For example, consider the case of John the Baptizer who was something of a warm-up act before the main show (which, in this case, was Jesus).

For some time before Jesus began his ministry in the northern part of Palestine (where he was from), John had been in the southern region ... out in the desert ... preaching.

And guess what he was preaching?

The third chapter of Matthew's gospel tells us:

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”
Matthew 3:2 (NIV)

... which, I hope you will remember if you've

been here for this series, is the same exact thing that Jesus would eventually go around preaching.

Matthew goes on to tell us that John was something of a wild man. Not only did he live in the desert wilderness ...

[His] clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey.

People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. Matthew 3:4-6 (NIV)

And one day, one of those who goes out to him is Jesus of Nazareth (who also happens

to be John's cousin). Apparently John has been aware for some time that something about Jesus is different; that he's special – so when Jesus asks to be baptized, John says “no, you need to baptize *me*.”

But Jesus says, in essence, “No, this is the right thing to do” and John consents and baptizes Him.

(By the way, the reason it was the right thing to do is that this is how Jesus identified himself with Israel. Even though He was not a sinner, by going into the water of repentance he was saying “I am with you. I represent you.”)

Anyway, as Jesus is coming up out of the water, Matthew tells us that heaven is opened, and the Spirit of God descends like

a dove and rests on Jesus. And a voice from heaven says, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”

Now, if you’re John the Baptizer and you see and hear and experience this, what are you thinking? You’re thinking, “Oh my! The message I am being led to preach – that the Kingdom of God is near; it’s coming – *really is true!* Here is the Messiah right in front of me!”

John is so convinced of this that sometime later, when his followers begin to notice that more and more people are following Jesus instead of him, John’s response is, in essence, “that’s how it ought to be. I’ve told you that I am not the Messiah, just the one to prepare the way for him. *He must increase and I must decrease.*”^{vi}

Little did John know at that point just how much he would decrease because not long after this, he was thrown into prison by the Roman-appointed ruler over Galilee, Herod Antipas. And for two years, John languished there and then he was executed. He was beheaded.

However, before then, even though he was imprisoned, John apparently was able to keep up with what Jesus was doing because, just before his execution ...

Matthew tells us that ...

When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples to ask him, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?” *Matthew*

11:2-3 (NIV)

What kind of a question is that?

This is the guy who baptized Jesus and saw the dove and heard the voice. This is the guy who told his followers to start following Jesus instead. And now he's asking "did I get it right? Are you really the Messiah?"

Years ago when I first studied this passage, I thought that John was doubting Jesus because he was still in prison. I mean, after all if Jesus was the Messiah and John was the one preparing the way (as well as Jesus' cousin!), why wouldn't Jesus do something to spring him from Herod's dungeon? That would be hard to handle.

But that's not the reason for John's question. The text tells us the reason.

Let's look at it again: "When John heard about *the deeds of the Messiah*" ... that's when he started to wonder.

So, what were the deeds of the Messiah? And why would that cause John to doubt?

Again, the text tells us the answer to the first question.

Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor." Matthew 11:4-5 (NIV)

Now, if you've heard either of the previous two messages in this series, you'll hopefully recognize that as almost identical to the

quote from the prophet Isaiah that Jesus used to begin his ministry in his hometown of Nazareth.

Remember, He takes the scroll and reads ...

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Then He says to everyone in the synagogue ...

“Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

Luke 4:19-21 (NIV)

From the very beginning Jesus said “this is what I am going to do in fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy.”

And that’s what he’s *been* doing for two years. And he says to John’s disciples “go tell him that.”

But then he adds a very strange postscript to the message.

“Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.”

Matthew 11:6 (NIV)

... which begs the question: why would John “stumble” – why would he be tripped up in his faith – on account of Jesus and what He was doing?

To answer that question – and *to understand why so many others stumbled on account of Jesus*

– we have to rewind the clock back to the beginning of John’s ministry at the Jordan River when all those people were coming out to hear him and to be baptized.

Remember John’s main message?

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

Matthew 3:2 (NIV)

... which, again, is the exact same message Jesus was going to preach BUT with a very different application than John makes.

Here’s what I mean.

Matthew tells us that when the civic and spiritual leaders of Israel come from Jerusalem to see what John is doing ...

... John says to them:

“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ... The ax is already at the root of the trees and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”

Matthew 3:7,10 (NIV)

And then he says ...

“I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry.” Matthew 3:11a (NIV)

And John is clearly speaking of the Messiah because the Messiah is the one who, according to prophecy, brings the Kingdom of God to Earth – and that’s what John’s gig is all about.

John continues:

“His [the Messiah’s] winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

Matthew 3:12 (NIV)

So, what does it sound like John is expecting when it comes to “the deeds of the Messiah?”

I think his vision is pretty clear.

The Messiah will bring *judgment* – “wrath” and “unquenchable fire.”

In John’s mind, *that* is what’s supposed to happen when God’s Kingdom comes. The Messiah is supposed to put down the

enemies of God ..., who, of course, also happen to be ...

- The political enemies of Israel which has suffered for 500 years at the hands of the Gentile infidels like the Romans who are currently occupying their land ...
- And the Samaritans who are racial and ethnic half-breeds – worthy of rejection and scorn because their ancestors compromised their Hebrew heritage and married Gentile women hundreds of years before. (By the way, those ancestors were the poor people left behind when Nebuchadnezzar exiled the best and brightest to Babylon).

- Those enemies also include the spiritual riff-raff who don't keep the kosher laws, do bad things like collect taxes for the Romans, sell their bodies for sexual pleasure or just aren't serious enough about God.

Lots of tension in Israel during that era Jesus' day. Lots of anger and bitterness and mistrust and hatred between those on opposite sides of various "fences."

And John believes (along with many others) that, in his wrath, the Messiah is going to take all of them down. He's going clean up the joint with fire.

An Alternate Vision

But in Jesus' vision of the Kingdom what

does the Messiah bring? *It's not judgment.*

Instead, He brings what Isaiah called “the year of the Lord’s favor” – a time of grace (which is favor we don’t deserve and cannot earn).

This is why Jesus tells a strange parable about a man ...

“A man planted a fig tree in his garden and came again and again to see if there was any fruit on it, but he was always disappointed. Finally, he said to his gardener, ‘I’ve waited three years, and there hasn’t been a single fig! Cut it down. It’s just taking up space in the garden.’

“The gardener answered, ‘Sir, give it one more chance. Leave it another year, and I’ll give it special attention and plenty of fertilizer. If we get figs next year,

*fine. If not, then you can cut it
down.” Luke 13:6-9
(NLT)*

Whereas John preached that the axe was already laid at the root of the tree, ready to chop it down because it wasn't bearing fruit, Jesus says that tree will be shown favor. Grace and mercy will be given to it in hopes that it will produce.^{vii}

And his point is clear – he is graciously allowing time for people everywhere to repent and believe.

And this is why Jesus never makes any move whatsoever to launch a resistance movement or organize a rebellion against the Roman Empire.

This is why Jesus does crazy things like

traveling through Samaria instead of avoiding it as was the custom of “good Jews”; why He preaches the good news of the Kingdom to a Samaritan woman of ill-repute and her village; why he tells parables in which the hero is a hated Samaritan instead of an Israelite.

This is why Jesus eats and drinks with tax collectors, prostitutes and other notorious characters instead of shunning them; why He is known as “the friend of sinners” (which was not intended as a compliment).

This is why Jesus heals on the Sabbath and touches the untouchable; why He doesn't call down fire from Heaven on those who don't believe in Him.

Clearly, Jesus and John are not on the same

page concerning what it means for God's Messiah and God's Kingdom to come to Earth. And this is why John was wondering: "Jesus, are you the one? Or should we look for someone else?"

About Enemies

So, was John wrong? Actually, no, he wasn't.

Turns out that when Jesus takes that prophetic word from Isaiah as his Messianic mission statement (so to speak), He doesn't quote the whole thing.

Isaiah wrote:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me ...to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor AND the day of vengeance of our God."

Isaiah 61:2 (NIV)

John, along with many of his countrymen and women, was understandably looking forward to that day of vengeance; the day when God will forcefully intervene and set everything to rights again.

But Jesus said, “It’s not yet time for that day. It’s coming but not yet. Now is the time of the Lord’s favor. The coming of the King and the Kingdom is *good news* and not just for Israel. *It’s for everyone.*”

And I don’t know about you but, as a Gentile and as a sinner (by any measure of the word), I am so glad Jesus stopped short of completing that sentence.

But why did He do that? Well, I’ll tell you.

- The reason why Jesus stopped reading at “the year of the Lord’s favor” ...
- The reason why Jesus did and said so many unexpected and culturally unacceptable things that freaked out his so many of His own people ...
- The reason why God’s Kingdom is good news for everyone and not just the Jewish people is that ...

Instead of *hating* the political, racial, economic and spiritual enemies of Israel (and God), Jesus actually *loved* them.

Now, to you and me, that’s kind of old news because we’ve heard it all our lives. “Jesus loves me, this I know for the Bible tells me so.”

But to the people of Jesus' day, it was strange, radical, and heretical. It was so blasphemous and so offensive that, eventually, the civic and spiritual leaders in Jerusalem concluded it would be best to turn Him over to the Romans on the charge of sedition and let them do what the Romans did to anyone other than Caesar who claimed to be king.

“Better that one man should die,” they reasoned, “than an entire nation perish”^{viii} which is why Jesus was crucified.

From a less-jaded perspective, one might say that it was love that motivated Jesus to go the cross.

Actually, that's exactly what the Apostle Paul *did* say:

*God demonstrates his own love
for us in this: While we were still
sinners, Christ died for us.
Romans 5:8 (NIV)*

... which is, again, mind-blowing.

But what's even more radical than *that* ...
even crazier than Jesus loving the enemies
of Israel and God instead of hating them ...
and this brings us to the main point for
today which is the alternative to anger and
bitterness and mistrust and even hatred of
“them” (whoever “them” is for you and your
tribe) ...

What's even more radical than Jesus loving
His enemies is that He said His followers
were to do the same thing.

“You have heard it said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’

And that was a very common perspective among the people of his day (and, quite frankly, of ours, too). “You’re justified in hating your enemies because they’re bad. They want to hurt you or they’ve already done so.

“But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”

Matthew 5:44-46 (NIV)

Friends, until that day when Jesus returns to finish Isaiah’s prophecy, there is going to be

division and strife. People are going to be selfish and stupid and evil. Sometimes, there are going to be entire groups of people who band together for the purpose of being selfish and stupid and evil.

But the antidote to that disease (which the Bible calls sin) ... the hope of the world, the potential for shalom (the peaceful full-flourishing of humankind) lies not in revenge and in retaliation towards those groups or individuals.

Instead, as Jesus taught and modeled, the antidote, the hope, the potential is in *love* for “them” – the sincere desire and prayer that God would bless and transform *them* as much as we hope and pray He’ll bless and transform us – even though, in our minds, they don’t deserve it.

- That God would bless and transform President Trump as much as we hope He will bless and transform us.
- That God would bless and transform those football players protesting the anthem today as much as we hope He will bless and transform us.
- That God would bless and transform the ex who cheated on us.
- That God would bless and transform the drunk driver who took the life of our loved one.
- That God would bless and transform Kim Jong Un, Chuck Schumer, Shawn Hannity, Harvey Weinstein, Steve

Bannon, Matt Lauer, or whoever the villain of the moment might be.

You see what I'm doing here and I think you get the idea.

But let's be honest. In the world in which we live day today, *that sounds really stupid*. And dangerous, too, because if you do that you kind of thing open yourself up to the potential for all kinds of hurt. You have to look out for yourself. You have to protect yourself against "them" even if it means resorting to eye for an eye or a preemptive violence.

But maybe the way our world is looking at it is not entirely accurate. Maybe we've all been brainwashed into thinking that violence is just the way it has to be. Maybe

people like Jesus and MLK Jr are correct.

King, who as you know, led what was probably the greatest non-violent resistance movement ever *based on this exact principle Jesus taught* of loving your enemy (Google it – King was a pastor long before he was a civil rights leader) ...

King once said that ...

Darkness cannot drive out darkness;
only light can do that.

Hate cannot drive out hate; only love
can do that.

For hate multiplies hate, violence
multiplies violence, and toughness
multiplies toughness in a descending
spiral of destruction. Returning hate
for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper

darkness to a night already devoid of stars.

... which is why Jesus – and John the Baptizer – said we have to *repent* – which means to change the way we look at things – in order to experience life the way God intended it, i.e. the Kingdom of God.

See, in the mind of Jesus – in God’s mind – the way it *has to be* isn’t self-protection or violence. The way it *has to be for our own good* is to love our enemies.

Making Sense of It

Now, again, I’ll admit: this sounds like crazy talk. The only way you can do it ... the only way you can shape your thinking in such a way that it actually makes sense is that you

have come to believe two things and you've experienced one.

First the two beliefs.

1. You believe that the real enemy is not “them” but the Evil One.

2. You believe that no matter what happens, in the end, God wins.

You believe that the Kingdom and the power and the glory are his no matter what happens in this life. You believe that “for those who love God, nothing irredeemable can happen to you.”^{ix}

Why would you believe that? Because we remember the day Jesus died not as Dark Friday, Tragic Friday, or Disaster Friday. We remember it as *Good Friday*.^x

But what makes it good? Because, two days later, on that Easter Sunday morning when Jesus rose from the dead, God redeemed the evil and suffering that was the result of Him loving His enemies!

And that means that nothing in our lives – including whatever *our* enemies can do – is irredeemable.

Those are the two things you have to believe in order truly love an enemy.

3. As to what you have to experience ... in my personal experience, the only way you can love your enemies is to have experienced the love God has for you.

You must know beyond a shadow of a doubt that because of the year of the Lord's favor,

Jesus chose to love you even though you were a sinner, even though you were His enemy.

He loved you so much that He would give his life for you.

Communion

Feature – The Sound That Saved Us All

Worship Song – This Is Amazing Grace

CLOSING COMMENTS – Rick

Football Sunday announcement – two weeks from today

Video – Football Sunday Promo

Endnotes

ⁱ Jeremiah 29:12

ⁱⁱ http://www.bible-history.com/map_fall_of_judah/fallofjudah_timeline_of_events.html

ⁱⁱⁱ See Daniel 9:24-27

^{iv} This phenomenon is well-documented in sources such as the *Antiquities of Josephus* (see N.T. Wright's *Simply Jesus*).

^v See my message "A New Kind of Resolution" in the first week of this series

^{vi} John 3:30

^{vii} http://www.egrc.net/articles/director/articles_director_0103.html

^{viii} John 11:50

^{ix} Dallas Willard

^x Dallas Willard