

**This Is Jesus II: Dawn of a New Day**

***Jesus v. The Empire***

**January 14, 2018**

**PRE-SERVICE VIDEO**

**Worship Songs – Build Your Kingdom  
Here / Transition / King of Love  
Behind the Scenes – Video**

**Feature Song – Something Just Like This /  
Offering**

Good morning everyone.

“I want something just like this” ... that’s a great way to begin the second week of our series “This Is Jesus: Dawn of a New Day” ... because that describes exactly the mindset of the Jewish people when Jesus of Nazareth roamed the villages and countryside of first-century Palestine.

At that particular time there was a great expectation that not only would God deliver them from the oppressive Roman Empire but that He would do it “just like this”; that it would happen in a certain way.

As to *why* there was such an expectation and *how* that actually turned out, we’ll talk about that in just a bit ... but first a quick reminder that the reason we’re investing so much time in this mega-series on the life of Jesus is that so many of us – including Christians for whom Jesus is the reason we’re even here in the first place – so many of us are missing a critical piece of information.

Even those who aren’t Christians know the basic truth claims about Jesus.

- That He was God incarnate; God in

human flesh born of a virgin at Christmas.

- That He died on the cross as the atoning sacrifice for sin and rose again on Easter Sunday.

It's *the parts in between* Christmas and Easter we're not sure about. What are we to make of *all that*?

I mean, given that Jesus died and then rose again, *does it even matter* what He was doing in His time on Earth? More importantly does it have anything to do with us today?

And that's our goal in this series: to fill in that information gap ... because, turns out it really *does matter* and it has *a lot* to do with us today.

# In the Roman World

So, let's talk about the expectations of the Jewish people living in the occupied state of Israel at the time of Jesus. To do so, we're going to have to understand at least a bit of the historical and political situation.

And let's begin by meeting the man who was in charge of it all, at least from a human perspective. We're first introduced to him as Luke describes for us the occasion of Jesus' birth.

*In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. And everyone went to their own town to register.*

*Luke 2:1,3 (NIV)*

... including Joseph and Mary, the mother of Jesus.

When Augustus spoke, everyone obeyed because no matter where you went in the Roman Empire, reminders of his power and the power of his kingdom were inescapable.

So who was he? Let's watch.

**Video Clip 01 – Augustus Caesar (2.2 min)**

(Begin) Voice: “On the tails of the murder of Julius Caesar ...”

(End) Voice: “... became a time of stability, trade, travel and prosperity.”

So, Augustus (or Octavian) was the first true Emperor of Rome. And his primary commitment was – I'm not joking about this – to “make Rome great again” by increasing its wealth and power in the world.

History tells us early in his reign, Halley's Comet passed over Rome. Augustus took advantage of the good fortune and claimed it was the spirit of Julius Caesar (who had adopted him) entering heaven and becoming divine.

Of course, if *Julius* was a god then, as his son, what would that make Augustus?

The *son of god* – part human, part divine. And he made sure that everybody knew it.<sup>i</sup>

In fact, the Roman historian Tacitus wrote that Augustus “was surrounded with such an abundance of religious honor that many people thought there was nothing left for the worship of the *heavenly* gods.”<sup>ii</sup>

**(pic) For example, here's an inscription that was discovered in what is now western Turkey that dates to 9BC or, about 5 years before Jesus was born.**

Translated it says:

“The most divine Caesar...we should consider equal to the Beginning of all things...; for when everything was falling [into disorder] and tending toward dissolution, he restored it once more and gave to the whole world a new aura; Caesar...the common good Fortune of all...the beginning of life and vitality.

“Whereas Providence, which has regulated our whole existence...has brought our life to the climax of perfection in giving to us [the emperor] Augustus, whom it [Providence] filled with strength for the welfare of men,

and who being sent to us and our descendants as Savior, has put an end to war and has set all things in order;

“And [whereas,] having become [god] manifest (phaneis), Caesar has fulfilled all the hopes of earlier times ...in surpassing all the benefactors who preceded him...

“And whereas, finally, the birthday of the god [meaning Augustus] has been for the whole world the beginning of *good news* (euangelion) concerning him [therefore let a new era begin from his birth].

“All the cities unanimously adopt the birthday of the divine Caesar as the new beginning of the year...”<sup>iii</sup>

To the Romans, Caesar Augustus' birthday



was kind of like Christmas!

When Augustus died in AD 14 (Jesus was maybe 18 years old), it was proclaimed that he was now elevated to full divine status like Julius. And that meant that his adopted son, Tiberius, was also considered to be ... you guessed it, *the son of god*: part human, part divine.

And this pattern of supposed deification continued and strengthened down the line of Roman Emperors.

## **In the Jewish World**

So that's what was going on in the heart of the Empire to which the Jews of Jesus' day were subjugated. As to what's going on among *them* ... in particular, in that area

where Jesus had grown up and become a man ...

We got into that last week when we saw how He announced the beginning of His ministry at the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth. (As always, if you missed the message you can watch, listen to or read it in the media section of our app, website or podcast).

Luke tells us that on the Sabbath day, Jesus stood up in the synagogue and read this prophecy from Isaiah 61.

*“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 said ...**

*"Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."*

*Luke 4:19-21 (NIV)*

And we saw that was a big deal because for hundreds of years the Jewish people had been waiting for "the year of the Lord's favor" – which was *not* how any of them would have described their existence at that time or for a very long time.

Even though it had been almost 500 years since their ancestors had been released from their catastrophic exile into Babylon and returned to their homeland, the nation of Israel had been continually dominated by one empire or another. In many ways, they

were *still* in exile because ...

1. They were not free and ...
2. Because God's glory was no longer present in their Temple as it had been in the time of Solomon.

500 years is a long time to live like that if you think you are the chosen people of God!

But hope was rising because of a prediction from the Hebrew prophet Daniel (who had lived through that Babylonian exile); a prediction that God's discipline of Israel would last for 490 years and then God Himself would come to them and be their King.

And now Jesus was proclaiming at the

synagogue in Nazareth and then, all over the place, that ...

*“The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near! Repent and believe the good news!”*      *Mark 1:15 (NIV)*

... which is the exact same word in Greek – euangelion – that’s found on that inscription we saw and on many other documents of the Roman Empire in that era.

Now, imagine that you’re one of the Jewish people living in that time.

- You’ve heard about what happened in Nazareth.
- You’ve heard about and maybe even seen some miracles.

- You know or have heard about people being freed from demonic oppression.
- You've heard that Jesus has called 12 men to be his disciples, kind of looks like a reconstitution of the 12 tribes of Israel. (Even those disciples believe that).

On top of it all, you know that the Romans for about 60 years have been going around saying that *their Emperor* is divine and the “son of God” and a savior – *a messiah ...* which, to you, is blasphemy.

You've heard their leaders talking about the “good news” or “the gospel” of Pax Romana – the peace of Rome – and you know it's BS because it means peace and prosperity *for*

*them and not for you.*

- For you it means high taxes and maybe even conscripted labor.
- For you it means fear of punishment and death by crucifixion at the least sign of displeasure or resistance. (The Romans had mastered the art of “keeping the peace” through intimidation and merciless displays of force).
- For you it means having to violate your conscience by agreeing that there is “no king but Caesar” (which was what all of those subject to Rome were required to confess).

So, with all of that as background ... when

you hear Jesus proclaiming “good news, the Kingdom of God is at hand” what’s your reaction? What do you think He’s doing?

I’ll tell you what you *don’t* think.

- You don’t think He’s talking about how to go to Heaven when you die.
- You don’t think He’s talking about one day being able to move from this physical existence to a disembodied spiritual existence.

Instead ...

- You think He’s using the Roman Empire’s own words to mock them. He’s throwing it back in their face! (And He is).



- You're sure that somehow, someday, He's going to get rid of them and take the throne for Himself.
- And you think that very soon the whole world will turn upside down and you and your family and friends are going to be on top instead of them.

**The Apostle John tells us that's exactly what the people of Jesus' day were thinking.**

*After the people saw the sign Jesus performed, they began to say, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world."*

*John 6:14 (NIV)*

And the fervor continued to build until the fateful day when Jesus and his disciples

entered Jerusalem to celebrate Passover.

Luke writes that ...

*As he went along, people spread their cloaks on the road.*

*When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen:*

*“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!”*

*“Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!”*            *Luke*  
*19:36-38 (NIV)*

This was the moment they'd been waiting for. All the old songs came flooding back,

and they were singing, chanting, cheering, and laughing. At last their dreams were going to come true.<sup>iv</sup>

But that's not what happens.

In both cases, Jesus' reaction is very odd and unexpected.

**After the feeding of the multitudes,  
John writes that ...**

*Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself. John 6:15 (NIV)*

**Luke writes that ...**

*As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it. Luke 19:41 (NIV)*

Luke goes on to tell us that Jesus said ...

*“The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another ...”*

... which, by the way, is exactly what happened 37 years later in AD 70 to the city of Jerusalem and its beautiful Temple. The Roman legions laid siege to the city. Anyone who tried to escape was immediately crucified. The Jewish historian Josephus writes that crosses were lined up for miles on the main road leading out of Jerusalem.

When the soldiers finally broke through the

walls, he says, they discovered the famine was so bad that people had been eating the flesh of corpses. And then they killed the remaining survivors and literally disassembled the city stone by stone.

Doesn't sound like the "year of the Lord's favor" does it? And it certainly couldn't be called "good news."

So, *what is going on here?*

Jesus explains.

**"All of this bad stuff is going to happen," he said ...**

*"... because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you."*

*Luke 19:44 (NIV)*

"The King came right on time as promised.

But you missed it.”

So, why did they miss it?

Because they were looking for something “just like this”:

- A king who would go toe-to-toe with the Caesars and the Herods.
- A king who would lead a military rebellion against Rome.
- A king who would condemn and literally destroy their enemies.

But Jesus wouldn't do that because, *when God becomes King*, there's a completely different strategy for overcoming the Empire as He repeatedly explained and then modeled for them.

Let's watch.

**Video Clip 02 – The Gospel of the Kingdom (3.5 min)**

(Begin) Voice: “There's this beautiful poem ...”

(End) Voice: “But for Jesus this is what had to happen.”

Now, that takes us a bit further that we need to go this morning – we'll talk about the crucifixion and death of Jesus in the days to come ... but let's try and summarize what it means *strategically* for Jesus to be King and for Caesar (or Donald or Hillary or Barack or Vladimir or Little Rocket Man or anyone else) *not* to be.

## **The Way of the King**

And let's start with a question that

perplexed the disciples then (and still does today): Does the fact that Jesus would not take power by force mean that Jesus backed down? That He backed off of the idea that the Kingdom was coming and that He was the king?

I think not. There's no mistaking that all of the language *from* Jesus and *about* Jesus (lord, savior, messiah/king, kingdom, etc) represented a collision of claims. In contrast to any other ruler who might *assert* to be lord and savior (as Augustus did and most politicians today do), Jesus *is* lord and savior.

One day, as Paul writes, every knee *will* bow and every tongue *will* confess that Jesus the Messiah of Israel is the world's one true Lord – the King over everything ...



...which tells us a few things about the Kingdom of God.<sup>v</sup>

**1. The Kingdom of God obviously doesn't operate like the kingdoms of this world.**

How do the kingdoms of this world work?

**Jesus once defined it like this:**

*“You know that, among the Gentiles, those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them. And their great ones are tyrants over them. Not so with you.”*

*Mark 10:42 (NIV).*

In this statement, Jesus is clearly slamming the existing “order of peace” (the vaunted Pax Romana) for being based on the oppressive use of force.

And He is saying, “My kingdom doesn’t work that way. My way of ordering human society and culture is not of the order of political authoritarianism. It’s not like the kingdoms of this world. It operates on a different kind of power” ...

... which is the second observation.

**2. The motivational power of the Kingdom isn’t “force” but humility and sacrifice and love.**

... which is why, as the video said, Jesus allowed the Jewish leaders and Romans to crucify him. Again, we’ll say more about that at a later date.

But this is a very powerful observation – one that people like Martin Luther King, Jr. and

Desmond Tutu understood and applied. The kingdom accomplishes its goal of transformation and peace by working from the inside out and not the outside in.

Now, it does seem counterintuitive that humility and sacrifice and love are more powerful than force but in reality, it's true. That's because once you go down the road of using force to create peace, it's very hard to get off of it. (Just to be clear, I'm not talking about situations where self-defense is called for).

That's what happened when Jerusalem was wiped out – again – by the Romans. Instead of following Jesus in the way of His Kingdom, the citizens of Jerusalem tried to fight back in the way of the Romans and lost their city and Temple, a condition that exists even to

this day 2,000 years later!

Third observation ... and I think this one is critical in light of our current political situation especially at the national level.

**3. God's Kingdom comes not *in place* of other kingdoms but in *spite* of them.**

There's a mindset among many Christians today (American Christians I should say because you don't find it in Chinese Christians or African Christians) ... there's a mindset that says we need to get the right people into office, get the right laws passed – basically, to replace those who are of the “kingdom of this world” with those who belong to the Kingdom of God.

I wouldn't argue against the idea that it's better for a nation and culture to have godly

leaders and policies than *not* to have them (the Bible says that) *but I think it's significant that Jesus never made a big deal out of that.*

I mean, he told the Jewish leaders to pay their taxes. And in his interactions with Roman soldiers, he never told them to quit soldiering. He never told them to turn against their commanders and start a rebellion. And he never told his followers to do that kind of thing either.

Why? Because God's kingdom comes not in place of other kingdoms but in spite of them which means that it's possible to live as a citizen of two kingdoms – the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom (or country) of which we're a part in this world; always remembering of course, that our primary allegiance is to God.

One author puts it like this:

“The emperor and his system may indeed be under the influence of evil and worthy of judgment. However, God has chosen to keep such rulers in place to keep the world from anarchy.

God’s people are called to learn to live within the governing systems, while holding [themselves] to God’s high standards and confronting [themselves] in the face of injustice.”<sup>vi</sup>

Ok, one more observation we can glean from how Jesus talked about and modeled the Kingdom of God. And we’ll talk more about this next week but I just want to throw it out there for now.

**4. The real enemy is not “Caesar” (or Trump or whoever) and it’s not “the Empire” (whether it’s the Romans or the liberals or the conservatives).**

The Ruler and the System that needs to be defeated isn’t of made of flesh and blood. Again, more next week.

But for now, let’s just stand back and think about this for a minute.

These four principles were so *hard* for the people of Jesus day to accept:

- God’s kingdom doesn’t operate like the kingdoms of this world?
- It doesn’t try to get results by “force” but by humility and sacrifice and love?
- It exists not in place of other kingdoms

but in spite of them?

- And our real enemy is not “Caesar” or “the Empire”?

They were so hard to accept that Jesus said they missed out on the time of God’s coming to them ... which was incredible sad for them and their children.

But I submit that *you and I* are so conditioned by the way our world works that they’re just as hard for *us* to accept as they were for *them*.

In fact, I think it’s probably *harder* to follow Jesus in this area than in any other because we live in a culture of constant outrage, where we’re *not* going to let anyone take advantage of us or “our people” ...



... which means that Jesus' proclamation to them still applies to us.

*“The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near! Repent and believe the good news!”*      *Mark 1:15 (NIV)*

Repent. Change your mind about power and position and enemies and how all of that ought to work.

And that's what we'll talk about next week, too!

## **Conclusion**

As we close this morning, the band is going to do a song that, I think you'll agree, is very worshipful. In fact, we're going to learn it next week as a congregation and hopefully

put it into our rotation for a while

And the reason we're going to close this kind of a message in this way is because worshipping Jesus is the most politically-charged act we can ever perform. In fact it's a little bit subversive because it declares that Jesus is Lord and that therefore, by strong implication, nobody else is: not the government, not the corporations, not our friends or our family.

Furthermore, it doesn't just declare that as "something to be believed" (like the fact that the sun is hot or the snow is cold). Instead, it commits those who worship to *allegiance*; to following this Jesus, to being shaped and directed by him.

It declares that He's not just King of the

Kingdom, he's the King of us.

## Feature Song – What a Beautiful Nam

### CLOSING COMMENTS

Small group sign ups

Petition signage

### Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> [http://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/empire/augustus\\_religion.html](http://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/empire/augustus_religion.html)

<sup>ii</sup> <https://theologycurator.com/roman-empire-during-time-jesus/>

<sup>iii</sup> Quoted from <https://theologycurator.com/roman-empire-during-time-jesus/>. Note that I have moved the adoption phrase to the bottom of the declaration for public readability.

<sup>iv</sup> N.T. Wright, *Simply Jesus*

<sup>v</sup> Several of the observations that follow are from <https://peacetheology.net/pacifism/7-jesus-confrontation-with-empire/>

<sup>vi</sup> <https://theologycurator.com/roman-empire-during-time-jesus/> note that I have changed “them” to “themselves” as I believe we are to judge ourselves and not others, including “the powers.”