

Caesar and Jesus

by David Guzik

David Guzik's sermon explores the historical context of Jesus' birth, contrasting the political savior Caesar Augustus with the true Savior, Jesus Christ.

Duration: 20:06

Scripture: Isaiah 9:6, Micah 5:2, Matthew 6:33, Luke 2:1, Acts 5:37, Romans 13:1, 1 Timothy 2:1-2

Topics: "Roman Empire", "Birth Of Jesus"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the state of the Roman Empire before the birth of Jesus. The historian Will Durant is quoted, describing the Italian peninsula as worn out from civil war, with neglected farms, sacked towns, and stolen wealth. The breakdown of administration and protection led to unsafe streets and roaming highwaymen. Octavian, who later became Caesar Augustus, came to power and brought peace and political skill to the empire. He issued a decree for a census, demonstrating his immense power and authority. The sermon emphasizes the historical accuracy of the Bible and the significance of these events in setting the stage for the birth of Jesus.

Transcript

Luke chapter 2, beginning at verse 1. It came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This census first took place while Crinius was governing Syria. So all went to be registered, every one to his own city.

I like how the chapter begins. Luke, who was a medical doctor, so a trained man, a man of science, a man who knew how to evaluate evidence and knew about cause and effect from his time and his experience as a medical doctor. Luke tells us, and it came to pass, we must always remind ourselves that the Bible records actual history and real events.

This is not once upon a time. This is not fanciful stories of Zeus and Apollos on the cloudy heights of Mount Olympus. This is real people, real places, real rulers.

Because we read in verse 1 that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. The story of Jesus' human life began during the reign of one of the most remarkable men of ancient history, Caesar Augustus. And he was born with the name Octavian.

He was named after his father, as was common in that day. His grandmother was the sister of Julius Caesar, so he was born into that high-ranking household. Octavian, because of his great talent and just very sharp, ambitious young man, he came to the attention of his great uncle, Julius Caesar.

And Caesar came to adopt Octavian as his son. In 45 BC, again 45 years or so before the birth of Jesus, Octavian was made the heir and the adopted son of Julius Caesar, who had no sons himself. But within a year after this adoption, Caesar was murdered, and Octavian joined with two others.

One man named Mark Antony and another named Lepidius in splitting the domination of Rome in three ways. At that time, Roman domination extended all around the shores of the Mediterranean Sea. It was almost like the Roman Empire at that time was a settlement just with the Mediterranean Sea in the middle and everything for a couple hundred miles all around the Mediterranean Sea into North Africa, Egypt, Israel, all up and through Asia Minor and what we would consider today Turkey and that part of Eastern Europe.

Well, for decades before the death of Julius Caesar, the whole Mediterranean world was filled with wars and violence. And now under these three rulers, Mark Antony, Lepidius, and this fellow Octavian, it became far worse. There were decades and decades of bloody, brutal fighting for power and money in Rome and the provinces.

You open up the history books and you read it, and it's really more bloody and ghastly than I would feel comfortable sharing with you, the kind of things people were doing to each other in stealing and killing and murdering, and not just the common people, but high people at the highest levels. Now, Octavian and Mark Antony joined together and they soon pushed that fellow Lepidius out of the picture. And even though his sister married Antony, for 13 years, Octavian and Mark Antony existed together as rivals until 31 BC.

And for a year, the huge armies of Octavian and Antony assembled and positioned themselves. Now, you know who was on Mark Antony's side? Cleopatra, the Queen of Egypt. And they collectively brought together, this was Mark Antony, they brought together this battle, 500 warships, 100,000 foot soldiers, and 12,000 cavalry.

Octavian answered with 400 warships, 80,000 infantry, and 12,000 horsemen. But Octavian had a better strategy and more mobile ships. That was a big key to the naval battle.

And he defeated the combined forces of Mark Antony and Queen Cleopatra of Egypt at the critical battle of Actium. So now, Octavian was the sole ruler of the Roman world. Now, why is this even important? It's important for us to understand the kind of world that Jesus was born into.

Again, I want to remind you that for decades before this consolidation of power by Octavian, for decades before, the Roman world was plunged into wars, destruction, brutality, and immorality. Just a horrible state of affairs. Let me read you an extended passage from the noted historian, Will Durant, in his story of civilization.

He says, The Italian peninsula was worn out with 20 years of civil war. Its farms had been neglected, its towns had been sacked or besieged, much of its wealth had been stolen or destroyed. Administration and protection had broken down.

Robbers made every street unsafe at night. Highwaymen roamed the roads, kidnapped travelers, and sold them into slavery. Trade diminished, investment stood still, interest rates soared, property values fell.

Morals, which had been loosened by riches and luxury, had not been improved by destitution and chaos. Rome was full of men who had lost their economic footing and then their moral stability. Soldiers who had tasted adventure and had learned to kill.

Citizens who had seen their savings consumed in taxes and inflation of war and waited emptily for some returning tide to life, tide to lift them back to affluence. Women dizzy with freedom, multiplying divorces, abortions, and adulteries. Now, Octavian came to power, consolidated power as the sole ruler over the entire Roman Empire, and he came back to Rome and he said basically, to paraphrase, there's a new sheriff in town, we're going to change things.

And he changed it in a dramatic, dramatic way. He did basically three things to start a revolution, a renaissance of Roman life. You understand that a couple decades before Jesus was born, it looked like the Roman Empire might just implode upon itself.

But Octavius came to power, did three things. First, he brought peace because he defeated all his rivals, right? There's no more rivalry, no more civil war, he won. So that brought peace.

Number two, he brought political and administrative skill, perhaps even brilliance. This man, Octavian, was a brilliant political leader and statesman. But third, you know what else he brought? He brought a truckload of money from Egypt.

When he defeated Mark Antony and Cleopatra, he went to Egypt and they had incredible riches. He loaded it up, brought it back to Rome, paid the army lavishly, started huge public works and public helps, pumped what would be the equivalent today of trillions of dollars into the Roman economy, and things changed economically. So we need to understand that this was an incredible revolution.

People looked at this man, Caesar Augustus, and that was the name he took. His born name was Octavian. But Caesar Augustus was his name as the ruler.

They looked at this man as a savior because he really did start a renaissance in Rome. But as great as a man he was, he was only a man. And the man who brought the answers also took a very dear price.

Because for hundreds and hundreds of years, Rome prided itself on being a republic. And do you know what a republic is? A republic is a state that isn't governed by any man or any men. A republic is a state that's governed by laws.

One of the most important principles in a republic is to say no man is above the law. The law is what rules us. America is supposed to be a republic.

We're ruled by the Constitution, not by any man, but by what the laws say according to the Constitution. Rome prided itself on being a republic for hundreds and hundreds of years. But now, in this state, Octavius changed it all.

In 27 BC, he arranged for the Roman Senate to give him the title Augustus, which means exalted and sacred. Now, Rome wasn't a republic governed by law. It was an empire governed by an emperor.

And an emperor is above the law. The first emperor of Rome was the same Caesar Augustus. First in the line of emperors.

Will Durant, again, on this title Augustus, he says, Before this, the word had applied only to holy objects and places and to certain creative or helping gods. Applied to Octavian, it clothed him with a halo of sanctity and the protection of religion and the gods. That's all in that word Caesar Augustus that you read right there.

And so, this is saying something very important about the world that Jesus was born into. It was a world that was hungry for a savior and a world that was living in the reign of a political savior, Caesar Augustus. But that wasn't enough.

People knew it wasn't enough. Now, when you're in a really bad place politically, economically, culturally, societally, and things get better. Good politicians get in place.

The economy gets better. All these things come in place. You know, in some ways it's worse.

Because then you realize you've got all these things, but they're really not the answer. It really doesn't satisfy the emptiness inside. One of the great Christian historians of our century is a man named Kenneth Scott Latourette.

And this is what he says. He says Augustus and his successors had not solved the basic problems of the Mediterranean world. They had obscured them.

For what appeared to be a failure in government, they substituted more government. And government was not the answer. People needed more than better rulers.

And so, verse 2. The census first took place while Crinius was governing Syria. By the way, this is another historical anchor, isn't it? A real man, documented in secular history, ruling a real place. It says they took a census.

Now, this isn't like the census they take every 10 years in America, right? Where they just want to find where you live, how many in your family, and all that stuff. This wasn't for record keeping or statistics. It was to efficiently and effectively tax everyone in the Roman Empire.

Now, what's interesting is that some people have criticized the Bible here as a point of history. Saying that they have no independent corroboration of this taking place in the days of the Roman Empire. Well, but we know that many different unnamed censuses took place during that time.

An early Christian apologist, Justin Martyr, writing in the middle of the 2nd century, so 150 years after the time of Jesus. He said that in his own day, more than 100 years after the time of Jesus, you could look up the registers of the same census that Luke mentions. Also, what's interesting here is it says in verse 2, this census first took place.

The idea in the original language is that this was the first enrollment. Now, using a census for taxation was so common in ancient Rome that Luke calls this one the first enrollment to distinguish it from another one that he mentions in Acts chapter 5. Look at verse 3. So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city. This blows my mind.

Think about it. Verse 1, Caesar Augustus, there he is in the ivory palaces of Rome, stands up. I decree that everybody's going to go back to their hometown, be registered and pay taxes.

Then you look at verse 3. So all went to be registered. Friends, that's power, isn't it? You say something and the whole world does it. Now, you might say, well, it wasn't the whole world.

In China, in South America, they went to... Well, you know, it was the whole Mediterranean world and that was a pretty awesome world. Friends, it may very well be that up to that point of time in history, that there had never been one man with more power over individual lives than Caesar Augustus. Now, overall, this man was a good ruler.

He expanded the territory of the Roman Empire and he did much for his people. By the way, you know, the greatest sorrows in his life came from his family life. He had a daughter who was a wayward daughter and he had no son.

And all of his nephews and grandsons and his favorite stepson all died young. But you just get the feeling any man with this kind of ambition, this kind of authority, you know what he must have thought. I make this decree, the whole world does it.

Pretty heady, isn't it? To think that you can make that decree and everybody does it. You know, Augustus really wasn't powerful at all. In John chapter 19, verses 10 and 11, Jesus confronted another Roman who thought he was pretty powerful, right? You know who that Roman was? Pontius Pilate.

And Pilate was looking for a reason, looking for an excuse to let Jesus off the hook. And Pilate was becoming exasperated with Jesus because Jesus wouldn't defend himself. And Pilate, in his exasperation, looks at Jesus, says, don't you know that I hold your life in my hands? And Jesus said back to him.

You could have no power at all against me unless it had been given to you from above. Now, if that applied to Pontius Pilate, do you think it applied to Caesar Augustus as well? Absolutely. The same principle applied to Caesar Augustus.

And as he sat in his palace and made his decree, he thought it was the supreme exercise of his will, the ultimate flexing of his muscle. You know, he was just a tool in God's hand, wasn't he? God had promised that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, right? Micah chapter 5, verse 2. So how do you get a young couple from Nazareth down to Bethlehem when they wouldn't normally be inclined to travel? Simple. Just work through the political so-called savior of the world and use him as a pawn in your plan to bring forth the real savior of the world.

Don't you see, too, that Augustus, for all of his accomplishments, he couldn't really be the answer. God allowed Caesar Augustus to rise to unheard of human power for many reasons. I would call Caesar Augustus the Roman John the Baptist because in his way, he prepared the way for Jesus, not even knowing it.

And at the end of the story, that's what's important, right? I mean, you have two John the Baptists. You have one knowing and you have one unknowing. I guess that's part of the application we need to draw from this tonight.

God has his plan and he's working it out. You can be a willing, participating, benefiting part of that plan. Or you can live on your will, your decrees, all about flexing your muscle and have it all blow up in your face.

No, God's going to get his will done. And I think that it's so instructive. Everybody in the world at that time knew who Caesar Augustus was.

Everybody knew. Now, how many people do you think knew who Jesus was? You know what? Several thousand, right? Maybe tens of thousands. I mean, he was a traveling minister and yeah, tens of thousands.

The whole Mediterranean world and beyond knew who Caesar Augustus was. But tonight, I had to tell you an awful lot about this guy. You probably wouldn't have known much anything about him.

But you know Jesus, don't you? Who's known today? Caesar Augustus? Man, you've got to blow the dust off some history books to find something out about him. Jesus is everywhere. There's a far more lasting legacy.

Jesus is Caesar Augustus. You know, God gave us that eternal perspective. See it from his way.

You know, and I think it tells us to not to fret about evildoers. Not to threat about the high and the mighty and the wicked. He even places a high authority in this world.

God's not worried about it. He can use a Caesar Augustus as a pawn in his plan. He'll use other leaders, other rulers, other people as well.

Friends, the beautiful part about it is we get the privilege of being willing tools in his hands. Willing co-workers with Jesus Christ. That's where I want to be.

You too? I think so. Let's pray. Father, I pray that you would give us a fresh vision tonight and even beyond, Lord.

About the greatness of your work. The greatness, Lord, of your power. We love you, Lord.

We thank you so much, Father. We just ask that you would purify our hearts. Give us that eternal perspective.

Help us to see things the way you see them. Lord, you weren't taken in by all of Caesar Augustus' pompous self-glory and riches and honor. You knew him, Lord.

Father, you knew who Jesus really was too. Help us to see things from your perspective, Lord. Not see as man sees, but as you do.

Thank you, Lord. We pray this tonight in Jesus' name. Amen.

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