

Two Kings

by David Guzik

The sermon contrasts the lives and legacies of Caesar Augustus and Jesus, highlighting the difference between human power and divine authority.

Duration: 32:34

Scripture: Luke 2:1-7

Topics: "Jesus Christ", "Salvation Choice"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker describes the scene of a powerful Roman emperor sitting on his ornate throne, surrounded by soldiers, courtiers, and servants. The emperor decides to tax everyone in the Roman empire and orders a registration of all the people. The speaker then shifts the focus to the humble birth and life of Jesus Christ, contrasting it with the power and authority of Caesar. Jesus, born in humble circumstances and working as a carpenter, never sought fame or power, but instead traveled around teaching and helping people. The speaker emphasizes the choice between following the power of Caesar or the power of Christ in one's salvation and daily life.

Transcript

As we begin this morning in Luke chapter two, I want to speak to you about a theme related to Christmas, and I would title this message, Two Kings, because we're going to take a look at two kings who are described for us in Luke chapter two, verses one through seven. Let's begin by reading verse one of Luke chapter two. And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.

This verse gives us our first king. He's titled in verse one of Luke chapter two, Caesar Augustus. And the story of Jesus's birth in Bethlehem, it begins with this mention of this Roman emperor who exercised his reign during the time of Jesus's birth.

And this man whom Luke titles Caesar Augustus, he was truly one of the most remarkable men of ancient history. Now, when I say that one word, perhaps that two word phrase, ancient history, I may have lost many of you right there by mentioning that word history. Some people don't like history.

Maybe they were cursed to have a very boring, dull history teacher in elementary school or high school or whatever. And there are many people who consider history boring. I want you to know that I tend to consider people who consider history boring, boring.

I think history is exciting. It's not necessarily pretty. When you go through the history of mankind, you find a lot more failure than glory.

When you go through the history of the church, you find oftentimes the story is a lot more often the story of failure rather than glory and giving glory to Jesus Christ. But there's a lot for us to learn from history, from biblical history. This mention in Luke chapter two, verse one of Caesar Augustus, when Luke originally put those words to the parchment that he wrote upon, everybody knew who Caesar Augustus was.

Luke wrote this many years after the reign of Caesar Augustus knew, but he was such a great man that his person cast a shadow after a hundred years after he had left this earth. People knew who Luke wrote about when he said that name, but we don't know these many years. Hence, we think of a great Roman emperor and a toga and some leaves on his head or something like that.

But it's hard for us to put the real person to the name. Let me help you with that this morning. He wasn't born with the name Caesar Augustus.

That's a title that he took later on. He was born with the name Octavian. He was named after his father.

His grandmother was the sister of Julius Caesar, and he was a very talented and gifted young man. He caught the eye of his great uncle, Julius Caesar, rather young in life. And Julius Caesar thought so highly of this young nephew of his, Octavian, that he adopted him as his own son.

And he was made the official heir of Julius Caesar in the year 45 B.C. Within a year of that great event, can you imagine what it would be like to be adopted into the family of Julius Caesar and say, You're my heir. You're the one who's going to inherit everything. Within a year of his adoption into the family and being declared the official heir of Julius Caesar, within a year, Julius Caesar was assassinated.

And from that point on, the Roman Empire was divided into three parts. One part was headed by this man named Octavian. The second part was headed by a man named Marc Antony.

And the third part was headed by a man named Lepidius. Well, there started many years of bloody struggle between these three men, because each wanted to dominate the other. You don't get to such a high place of status and prestige, such as Octavian and Lepidius and Marc Antony reached, without being a man of great ego, of great drive, of great desire to dominate.

And so they each wanted to dominate the other. And as I said, many years of bloody struggle followed the division of the Roman Empire under these three men. And eventually, Octavian and Marc Antony proved superior to Lepidius and they pushed him out of the picture.

Then the struggle was just between Marc Antony and Octavian. For 13 years, it was what you might call a cold war between the two. There wasn't open fighting, but there was a constant struggle for supremacy between the area ruled by Marc Antony and the area ruled by Octavian until that situation lasted for 13 years.

But in the year 31 B.C., they went to war against each other. And might I say they prepared for war against each other because they took a whole year to prepare for battle. Marc Antony assembled a great army.

Now, that name Marc Antony might echo in the memory of some of you, because you remember at least from the movies, if nothing else, Antony and Cleopatra. Who could forget Richard Burton and Elizabeth

Taylor in that epic movie, right? Well, it's true, they were real people who existed and Marc Antony made Cleopatra his ally. And together with her resources and her wealth and her ability, they took a year to assemble a huge army.

500 warships, 100,000 foot soldiers and 12,000 men on horseback as cavalry. Well, Octavian was no slouch himself. He assembled his army and his army wasn't quite as big.

He had 400 warships and 80,000 infantry and 12,000 horsemen. And the two armies positioned themselves and set themselves up in this great naval and land battle known as the Battle of Actium, which is one of the great military struggles of the ancient world. And they fought.

And even though Octavian had fewer men, he had smarter generals. And because of their brilliant military strategy and the great maneuverability of his warships and their forces, they decisively defeated Antony and Cleopatra, the forces of Octavian did at this great Battle of Actium. And so the big struggle was over.

No longer were there two or three people struggling for supremacy over this dominion of Rome. Now, there was one man named Octavian. And when he came and ruled over the entire Roman dominion, he brought three things that brought with them a dramatic change.

First of all, he brought peace. But it was the peace of a man who had defeated all of his rivals and was strong enough to keep everybody else down. This wasn't the peace of the birds singing and the flowers in the meadow.

This was the peace of a lockdown in a prison. Nobody dared raise their head. Second, Octavius brought political and administrative skill to the Roman dominions.

You might even say it was brilliance. This man was a leader and he knew how to organize and he knew how to administrate. And things became more efficient and more effective than ever in the government of Rome.

The third thing he brought was a truckload of money from Egypt. You know, Egypt was a wealthy nation. And Octavian brought all that money, all that wealth, and he pumped it into the army and he pumped it into the Roman economy.

And it was a time of great peace, great prosperity. But yet there was an oppressiveness over the whole Roman dominion. Now, a man as great as Octavian was yet only a man, and he brought a lot of resolution, a lot of answers to the Roman dominion.

But he did it at a great price. He demanded absolute power over the Roman dominions. And this was different.

This was a break with history because for hundreds and hundreds of years, Rome prided itself on being a republic. Do you know what a republic is? I'll give you just the briefest lesson in political science on this. A republic is a nation or a dominion governed by laws, not by a person, but by laws.

And in a republic, no man is above the law. Everybody answers to the law from the highest to the lowest. The law rules supreme in a republic, but not in a dictatorship.

In a dictatorship, the dictator is the law. He's above everything. Well, Rome held tightly to that idea that no man was above the law.

And the Roman Senate and the army and the various political leaders, they lived together in this somewhat difficult arrangement. But they did it and they pulled it off for centuries until Octavius came to power. And in the year 27 B.C., he arranged for the Roman Senate to give him the title Augustus.

Now, that title Augustus means exalted or sacred. Before Octavian's time, it was only applied to sacred buildings or sacred places or sacred property. But now, now a man was declared to be sacred.

A man was declared to have that kind of power. And now Rome was no longer a republic governed by laws. By the way, that's why Julius Caesar was assassinated.

Because when he started becoming more famous and more powerful, the men around him feared that he would become a dictator and that he would end the Roman Republic. And out of fear of that, they assassinated him. And now his great nephew brings that to pass.

The Republic of Rome was over and the Empire of Rome had begun. It had begun, I should say. Now it was an empire governed by an emperor.

And the first emperor of Rome was this man you read about right here in verse one, Caesar Augustus. So let's read it again. And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.

That's our first king. Do we look at our second king now? Start at verse two. This census first took place while Crinius was governing Syria.

So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee out of the city of Nazareth into Judea to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David. To be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child.

So it was that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn. The story of the second king is a lot simpler to tell.

Here's a man who was born in an obscure village in a backwater province of the Roman Empire. You know, Bethlehem was not the center of the world at that time. The only thing it was famous for was many centuries before the greatest king of Israel came from that city, King David.

Not much had happened in Bethlehem since David's time. It was a forgotten place. It was the kind of place that nobody really.

Bethlehem, where is that? I get that about Simi Valley when I tell people that I'm from Simi Valley. You hear that? Simi Valley, where is that? Isn't that where they make all those computer microchips? And I say, no, no, that's the Silicon Valley up in the Bay Area. I end up having to tell people where Simi Valley is in relation to other communities nearby.

A lot of people know Thousand Oaks more than they know Simi Valley, because if you drive on the 101 up north, you drive through Thousand Oaks. And so I explain that. But sometimes people don't know where Thousand Oaks is.

And so I got to say, well, it's sort of by Los Angeles. It's north of Los Angeles. It's halfway in between Los Angeles and Santa Barbara.

A lot of people understand it then. Friends, Bethlehem, it wasn't like Los Angeles. It wasn't like Thousand Oaks.

It wasn't even like Simi Valley. It'd be like saying Jesus came from Piru. That's how obscure this place was.

I mean, people just didn't know it. It didn't have the world's attention focused upon it. So Jesus came from there, from Bethlehem.

He was the child of a peasant girl. And I say girl because most people would probably say that Mary was in her late teens when she gave birth to Jesus. And he was born in suspicious circumstances.

Oh, you and I today, we know and we rightfully recognize the truth of the virgin birth. Yes, very much so. But you can imagine and sympathize that people in Mary and Joseph's day didn't catch on to it so quickly.

If a girl in the youth group came and she said, I'm pregnant. Well, you know, oh, boy, we're very sorry to hear it. And then she says it's of the Holy Spirit.

It's probably not going to go very far and that the youth leader or her parents, for that matter. And so they recognize that this is suspicious circumstances for this child to be born in. And when you think about it, he was born in a barn, a place where animals were sheltered.

It wasn't in a house. It wasn't in a hospital. It wasn't with proper medical care.

He was laid not in a cradle, not in a crib, not even on a soft bed. He was laid in a manger, a place where animals feed. The mass media of his day, they took virtually no interest in his birth.

There wasn't a fancy birth announcement in the Jerusalem Post or the Rome Gazette or anything like that. Nobody took notice. And I say, now, wait a minute.

Didn't he have an angelic announcement? And yes, he did. Now, that's pretty spectacular. I would agree.

But who did the angels make the announcement to? Did they go to Caesar Augustus in Rome and tell him no. Did they go to King Herod, the man who was sort of the sub king under Caesar Augustus ruling over Judea at the time? No, they didn't even go to the religious or the political leaders of the day. No, they went to shepherds.

And you should know that in Jesus's day, shepherds were regarded as disreputable people. Matter of fact, the testimony of a shepherd was not accepted in a court of law in Jesus's day. They had notices and sayings that when the shepherds walk through your village, you better make sure that your stuff is secure, because they were known to have sticky fingers and pick up things as they walk through.

And that's what the angels came to to give the announcement. Again, it wasn't a great publicity deal by any means. And this this man born in such humble circumstances, he worked in a carpenter shop until he was about 30 years old.

And then for three years, that's it. Three years he traveled around his somewhat obscure region and he traveled around the region teaching and helping people. He never wrote a book.

Never had a hit record. Never went to college. Never organized a demonstration or a protest.

He never ran for public office. The sound of his spoken voice was never recorded. He never had a family.

He never owned a home. He never appeared on television and he never painted a painting or had a painting made of him. He never had a tape ministry.

He never had a radio ministry. He certainly never founded a Bible college or a seminary. Never had a website.

Never had an email address. Never established a hospital or a charitable foundation. He was famous in his region for a brief period of time and then public opinion turned against him violently.

He was forsaken by his followers, arrested and most all of his friends denied that they ever knew him. He was tried, found guilty and then executed among other criminals. And it's true that he was buried in the tomb of a rich man.

But that was only because of the of the unexpected generosity of that rich man. If it wasn't for Joseph of Arimathea and his donation of his tomb for Jesus to lie in, his body would have literally been thrown into the garbage dump. Now that's a pretty good contrast between two kings, isn't it? You have Caesar and you have Christ.

Look at the power of Caesar. Look at verse one again. And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.

Amazing! You can picture the scene in your mind, can't you? You've seen enough movies to have some kind of image. I don't know if it's accurate or not. But you have any image of what a Roman emperor looks like in his palace? No, there he is in a marble palace.

Pillars and columns all around. There's a smoky oil lamp burning, giving a wonderful illumination to all the room. There's rich tapestries all around.

There's soldiers in that distinctive Roman soldier's uniform all about. There's courtiers rushing in and out. And servants waiting upon him hand and foot.

And as he sits on a very ornate throne, he has the idea that the treasury needs more money. And so he says, we're going to tax everybody in the Roman Empire. And everybody's going to go back to their hometown.

I'm going to make this decree. And when I say it, the whole world is going to do it. Look at it again in verse one.

It came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. Now look at verse three. And so all went to be registered, everyone to his own city.

He said it and it happened. You parents, you wish you had that kind of power over your own children. And Caesar Augustus had it over the whole Roman Empire.

You could argue that there had never been one man who had such power over the lives of so many other people until the time of Caesar Augustus. Nebuchadnezzar? No. A small kingdom compared to Caesar Augustus.

You know, the previous rulers, Artaxerxes and all the rest, all these great pharaohs and all the rest. They did not rule over as vast a dominion or have such concentrated power as Caesar Augustus. Now, you should know that overall, Caesar Augustus was a good ruler.

He expanded the territory of the Roman Empire and he did much for his people. But like almost every man of such ambition and such authority, you can just imagine how invincible he felt upon his throne in that marble palace. Think about it.

I make a decree and the whole world answers. Everybody acts when I tell them to. But I would suggest to you here this morning that Augustus really wasn't all that powerful at all.

Certainly not as powerful as he thought. Do you remember in the Gospel of John chapter 19, when 33 years after this time in Luke chapter 2, when Jesus stood before a later Caesar's representative, a guy named Pontius Pilate. When he stood before that representative of the Roman emperor, Pilate was frustrated because Jesus didn't seem to be cooperating the way that he should.

And Pilate tried to get Jesus's attention and he said to Jesus, this is in John chapter 19, verse 10. He says, Are you not speaking to me? Do you not know that I have the power to crucify you and I have the power to release you? That was Roman power. The power to coerce, the power to manipulate, the power to make people do what you wanted them to do.

And Pilate was saying to Jesus, don't you know that I have this power over you? You know what Jesus answered to him in verse 11 of John chapter 19? He said back to Pilate, he said, you could have no power at all against me unless it had been given to you from above. Pilate, you think you know all about power. You think you wield it within your hand.

You don't have any power except it's been given to you from above. Matter of fact, when when Jesus spoke with Pilate a little bit earlier in the gospel of John, Pilate was mystified that Jesus claimed to be a king, but where were his soldiers? And Jesus said, my kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my soldiers would fight on my behalf.

Pilate, you have one kind of power with all your soldiers, with all your coercion, with all your dominion, but I have a kingdom of a different kind of power. And Caesar didn't know about that power, but it was over him nonetheless. You see, as he sat in his palace and made his decree, he thought that it was the supreme exercise of his will, the ultimate flexing of his muscle.

But Caesar Augustus, who made that decree, he was just a tool in God's hands. You see, God had a problem, if you could say that God ever has a problem. But here was this woman who conceived miraculously when the Holy Spirit came upon her.

And this woman was about ready to give birth to the Messiah, but the problem is that she's a Nazareth. And the scripture specifically stated, for example, in Micah chapter five, verse two, specifically stated that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. Now, she would not be inclined to travel a great distance, and it was a great distance between Nazareth in the north and Bethlehem in the south.

It was a great distance and you had to go up and down a lot of elevation. She would not be inclined to make such a trip during the days of her pregnancy. So how do you get this woman from Nazareth to Bethlehem so that prophecy can be fulfilled? Well, you just put a bug in the ear of Caesar Augustus and tell him to tax the whole world and make everybody return to their hometown, because that's where

Joseph has to go and he brings Mary with her.

And so they make an unlikely and unexpected trip. And so here, Caesar Augustus, all his pomp, all his power, all his might, he's just a tool in the hand of God. And that's it.

Friends, look, look at Jesus, the second king. All of this happened almost 20 centuries ago. And yet today, Jesus is far and away the leading figure of the human race.

He's the ultimate example of love, of leadership, of sacrificial service. A couple of years ago at the coming of the new millennium, Time magazine did something. They did it to sell more magazines, I'm sure.

But they they put Jesus on the cover and they named him the man of the millennium. You know, they have a man of the year. They have a man of the decade, a man of the century.

Well, they couldn't resist at the coming of the new millennium to name Jesus the man of the millennium. And this is what Time magazine wrote about Jesus in the article inside that magazine. They said, quote, The single most powerful figure, not merely in these two millenniums, but in all human history, has been Jesus of Nazareth.

A serious argument can be made that no one else's life has proved remotely as powerful and enduring as that of Jesus's. They went on to write, It's an astonishing conclusion in light of the fact that Jesus was a man who lived a short life in a rural backwater of the Roman Empire, who died in agony as a convicted criminal. Yet here he is far and away the leading figure of the human race.

I had to explain to you in great detail who Caesar Augustus was. You know who Jesus is. Now, it's not that we need Time magazine to tell us about Jesus.

It's not like we care all that much about Time magazine's opinion of him. But I think the point is obvious. If they can see it, why can't you? If Time magazine can see who Jesus is, well, why can't you? It's right in front of us.

Friends, it's no exaggeration to say that all the armies that have ever marched, all the navies that have ever set sail, all the rulers who have ever ruled, all the kings who have ever reigned on this earth, all put together have not affected the life of man on this earth as much as this one man, Jesus Christ. So you see the contrast between the two kings? Now, let me conclude with applying it for something for you to do. For you to change in your attitude and in your life.

You see, not only do we have two kings, Christ and Caesar, but we also have two kinds of power. You have Caesar power and Christ power. Now, which one is more active in ruling in your life? Think of it in your relationships.

You have Caesar power and Christ power in your relationships. Caesar power is always looking for the advantage, always looking to dominate, always looking to control, always looking to have its place and for it to be the center. That's what Caesar power is all about.

But but Christ power is different, isn't it? Christ power is about love and sacrifice and being quick to forgive and being generous with reconciliation and all the rest of it. You see the difference between Caesar power and Christ power. And you see now why those relationships stubbornly stay messed up in your life.

As you're approaching them with Caesar power instead of Christ power, you can apply it to church life, can't you? Some churches seem to operate on Caesar power. For them, it's all about domination and and ruling and and power and and exercising that over people in the church and outside of the church and ruling with that kind of attitude and that kind of demeanor. Might I say that Jesus never intended that for his church, not to rule by Caesar power, but by Christ power, the love of sacrifice and truth and and reconciliation.

And as I said, being quick to forgive and quick to reconcile, that's that's Christ power. And then you have Caesar power and Christ power in your salvation. Caesar power would say about your salvation.

I got to save myself. I mean, that's how Caesar thought. I've got to do what I got to do.

I got to issue a decree. I've got to save myself. That's Caesar power in your salvation.

Christ power in your salvation is to say, I'm going to look at Jesus Christ and what he did for me on the cross. And I want him to transform my life by his love and his humble submission. Won't you convert me, Jesus? I surrender before you.

That's Christ power in your salvation. Which will it be for you this holiday season? For every day of your life, Caesar power exercised by coercion and ultimatums and demonstrations. And I'll show them who's in charge or by Christ power with love and generosity and giving and being quick to forgive and long suffering towards others.

What a difference between the two. I'm going to pray now to conclude my time with you this morning. As I do, I'm going to give an invitation during the prayer.

I'm going to invite any whose heart has been touched this morning. And you want to receive Jesus and be converted by his power. You're tired of living under the domain of Caesar, so to speak.

And now you want to live under the dominion of Jesus. If that's you and you'd like to surrender your life to Jesus in the middle of my prayer, I'm going to give you the opportunity to respond by raising your hand. And I'm going to ask the prayer team all around the room to look for any who raise their hand and they will come up and speak to you afterwards.

They will come up and want to pray with you. If you would like to commit your life to Jesus Christ this morning. Let's pray together right now.

Father, we thank you for your great love. We thank you that your power with us is the power of Christ, not the power of Caesar. Even though you have every right to rule in this reign, in this way.

Lord, you rule, you reign over us with love. How appreciative we are of that God. And so, Jesus, now we commit ourselves unto you.

And we ask that in our relationships, in our church, Lord, in our lives, in our salvation, that it would all be dominated by Christ's love instead of Caesar love. Father, pour out your spirit upon this blessed congregation. Let them walk forth this morning and all this week with a vital awareness of the surpassing love and power and glory of Jesus Christ.

Bless them in Jesus' name. Amen.

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