



A Clash of Kingdoms Session 5

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Ephesians 4:11–16

WHY LEARNING COMMUNITIES?

To develop spiritual character and strength to face **anything** by...

1. Learning anchored in Biblical truth but addressing cultural issues
2. Relationships that connect and blossom even outside the meetings

Remember... it's all about putting God's truth into action in everyday lives

INTRODUCTION

The context for EVERYTHING is the clash of Kingdoms. EVERY-THING!

John 10:10 (ESV) The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

From the Discovery Guide, pp 201-202.

“At Mt. Sinai, God commissioned the Hebrew people to be His partners in advancing His great plan of redemption by making Him known to the Gentile world. As part of His plan to continue gathering the Gentiles into the Kingdom of Heaven, God chose and commissioned Paul to be His herald of Good News that the long awaited Messiah had come... Paul's teaching was clear: the redemptive work of Messiah Jesus opened the door for all people, calling them to reject false gods of the kingdoms of this world, submit to His reign, and experience ‘the obedience that comes from faith.’... His goal was not to simply provide a different religious experience, but to present Jesus - the Jewish Messiah - as the one true Savior, Lord and King who dispelled chaos and brought the peace of the Kingdom of Heaven - Shalom - to all who followed Him.

But as Paul traveled closer to Rome, he increasingly encountered a world of chaos where a different ‘lord’ and ‘savior’ reigned. So the good news of the Shalom of God's Kingdom that Paul proclaimed consistently ran into opposition from the idolatry, immorality, injustice and oppression that the gospel of Caesar called peace.”

SESSION 5, “Confronting the Empire”

The forum of Philippi. The Apostle Paul came here in fact he was more than likely in this very forum. He had great success in this city. Two important converts. A roman, probably a soldier, and a woman a wealthy merchant one a man one a women one a God fearer who had joined with the jews one a gentile probably pagan. Both of them opened their homes and two new communities of faith, colonies, were born. But then Paul ran into conflict as he often did, he left here and went to another great city. And there, there's going to be conflict too. But a very different kind of conflict. Come, let's go see.

➤ Alexander the Great: a legacy of conquest for Hellenism

We're standing on the shore of the Aegean Sea. A harbor here, beautiful plaza. In 50 AD, the Apostle Paul came from the east. He left Philippi and walked a hundred miles here and entered the world of Alexander the Great. The city was named Thessaloniki in the Greek language. It was founded about 15 years after Alexander the Great's death and named after his sister. Alexander was born in the area in 334 BC at about twenty years of age, he passed through here heading east, much as the statue is pointed east, on his way to create an empire, to extend that Greek worldview called Hellenism, the worldview that makes the human the center of the universe. Around the statue is the secret of Alexander's killing machine: Blocks of Greek Macedonian soldiers called a phalanx would be armed with a long pike called a sarisa, sixteen to twenty feet long. But as those spears pointed forward, the first five rows of soldiers could extend their weapon into the killing zone. And with a much smaller army of highly trained Greek and Macedonian soldiers, Alexander defeated armies that numbered, according to history, in the hundreds of thousands. And the slaughter was immense.

➤ **Paul: ambassador of a very different kingdom**

And then in 50 AD came the ambassador of another king, bringing His kingdom, not to the east, but from the east. This kingdom declared a king who extended His kingdom not by killing, but by dying, who called on His followers to extend His kingdom, not with domination and with violence, but with trusting the king, loving one another, extending His compassion to a broken world. Oh, don't get me wrong, Paul was heavily armed, ready to take on the enemy, the powers of darkness and their agents, the human kingdoms of this world. Not with the sarisa of the Greek, but with the armor that Paul knew. He had the helmet of salvation. He had the breastplate of righteousness and faith and hope. He had the belt of truth. He had the sandals of the good news of the coming kingdom of peace. And best of all, in my mind, he had a sword, not unlike I suppose in metaphor, that sword that Alexander extends in his right hand, the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. And he came here armed to teeth, but with a very different kingdom. But Alexander's kingdom any more. It was still here but Alexander was long dead. It now was the domain of Rome. But that kingdom was still here and I don't think it's going to be very pleased to discover that there's another king and another kingdom. Let's join Paul as he enters the world of the kingdom of this world, Imperial Rome, at Thessaloniki. Let's go see. Come.

➤ **Thessalonica and the kingdom of this world at the time of Paul**

We are right in the middle of the modern city of Thessaloniki, and not a lot of excavation has been done simply because most of that ancient city is under the modern city. You hear it around us. But right here where the bus station used to be they did excavate one entire city block, about two football fields in total, I suppose. And they found the Roman agora, the Roman market, city hall, town square if you will. In Paul's day, Thessaloniki was Roman. It had become Roman at the battle of Pigna in the middle of the second century BC. So it had been under Roman control. But the really important event that linked it to Rome happened much later than that. The story goes like this: Julius Caesar was assassinated. His adopted son, Octavian, who will be Caesar Augustus in the future, along with Marc Antony, raised an army to punish the assassins. Some of the assassins, including Cassius and Brutus, went east and raised an army in Asia, modern Turkey, to restore the republic. When those two armies met at Philippi, Thessaloniki had to decide, who's side are we on? They chose Octavian, and decided to support him with supplies and other kinds of things that you might support an army with. Cassius and Brutus were furious and told their army, "When we win this battle you may have Thessaloniki to plunder." But they didn't win. Octavian and Antony did, and this city chose right.

➤ **Benefactions: great rewards in return for loyalty**
"Good works" to honor Rome and its deified emperors

In gratitude, Octavian, now Emperor Caesar Augustus, rewarded Thessaloniki tremendously with all kinds of what were known as benefactions. Not just money, but running water, aqueducts and fountains. Theaters, paved streets, arenas, stadiums, festivals, games and statues. And Thessaloniki became the most prosperous city in the district of Macedonia and eventually, its capital, all due to the Roman benefactions. But in that kingdom, like all kingdoms of this world, you don't give things to people because you like them so much. You give them because you expect something in return. Loyalty, obviously. But you expect a return on those benefactions. They called them by the way "good works". It reminded me very much of what Jesus said.

MATTHEW 5 "Let your light shine before men, so that your good works may be seen and they give glory to the Father."

Roman good works were to direct honor to Rome. So what could the Thessaloniki people, the Thessalonians do to repay Rome for all those benefactions? Well, recently I came across a couple of scholars who had a suggestion that something discovered right here illustrates the Thessalonian way of repaying Rome for her benefactions as well as anything. I'd like to show that to you. Come let's go see.

In the days of Caesar Augustus, Jesus was born. This is a famous statue of Caesar Augustus here in the museum at Thessalonica. Absolutely beautiful. Considered a masterpiece. Notice the uniqueness of what's on this statue. Notice, naked to the waist. The robe just below the navel, and the extra gathered over the left arm. Notice the legs, the right leg slightly forward as if moving into the future. The left leg slightly bent as if coming from the past. Barefooted, of course. Right arm extended. Remember pharaoh in Egypt always with his right arm extended. Fist and pointed finger, as if leading the way. Some experts call that "the divine pose" or "the pose of deity." That pose, whether with armor, as the one we saw in Rome, or without says, "This is the deified one." And that was found here in Thessaloniki. It probably stood somewhere where Paul could have seen him, declaring him to be lord and god. So let's go back to the question we had in the agora. The Thessalonians had all the benefactors of Imperial Rome and

especially the emperor. Their whole town has been renovated, in a sense. Their economy is wonderful. They've become a rich and prosperous place. But in that patron system, the Romans don't give those things because they like you so much. They want something in return. They expect something in return. In fact, they demand something. So what are we going to give them? What do you give to this Imperial Roman Empire? And I suppose, you're thinking, how do you keep the benefactions coming? There are other water systems that could be improved, the harbor could be deepened. There are other benefactions we could use. How do we keep them coming? What do we do? What do we return?

➤ **Advancing the worship of Caesar**

One of the things that people in the Roman Empire did, and this is the non-Romans, of course, was to advance the imperial gospel. To advance the worship of divine Caesar. Now remember in Latin there's actually two words for deity. There's the word *dei*, D-E-I, which refers to an eternal god like Jupiter or Mars. That's not who the emperors claimed to be. But there's also *divus*, D-I-V-U-S, deified humans. Humans that for one reason, either during life or after death, are granted the powers and privileges of deity.

Now, how do you go about doing that? How do you advance the imperial cult? How do you spread the imperial gospel? Well, some of the ways are obvious. You can worship him. So temples are built. Or you set up an altar, and there are altars, imperial altars found all over the Roman world dedicated to Caesar. Other ways it was done: coins were minted. Thousands of different kinds of coins with the head of the emperor on it and the words that declared him to be deified or often the son of a deified one. Or inscriptions. Oh, how many inscriptions have we seen in this study? All over the palace. On the Parthenon we saw one that said, "divine, deified Caesar," "divi Caesar." Or festivals: his birthday, his coronation day were celebrated all over the place in honor of him and worship was involved in that. Or libations. Most public events, even private banquets that were open to groups of people, began with the pouring out of wine or some other libation as a way of honoring divine Caesar.

And then the one that brings us here. Statues. You can't imagine how many imperial statues have been found, and how many probably haven't been found yet, which declare he is the son of a deified one. I love to stand at this spot. Kind of ironic, in a way, how this is set up. This is the deified Caesar of Jesus' birth, the one mentioned in the gospels of being emperor, called himself the son of god. So when Jesus was born, there were two people on the world's stage who claimed to be the Son of God, and Savior and Lord. Two stories that are going to meet.

But right over here another. Not as nice. I didn't pick this one because the head is missing and the bottom of the legs below the knees. But notice the same pose. The robe, with the extra over the arm, the slightly advanced right foot, the left leg back and bent. You can't tell bare feet of course, because they're not on that statue. One would assume, at least experts do, that the arm would also have been extended, making the same declaration. This is believed to be the statue of Claudius, a later emperor who claimed his deity as a descendent of this deified one. But he's the Caesar of Paul. So when Paul showed up here, this one claimed to be the deified son of god. Claimed to be the savior, claimed to be the lord.

And this is Thessaloniki. This is the town that Rome had poured benefactions into. This is the town that wants to make sure we return favors to Rome to keep those benefactions coming. So when Paul came here, there's no way he can avoid the imperial cult, it's everywhere. And he's gonna have to be really careful how he talks about Jesus, the son of God, the ascended King and Lord, the Savior of the world who comes bringing the Kingdom of Heaven because there's an alternative. Let's rejoin that story of Paul's visit here to Thessaloniki in the shadow of the Imperial Roman gospel. Come, let's go see what happens, come.

➤ **The language of worship**

What an unbelievable example of the Thessalonian response to curry Roman favor. That kind of thing happened so frequently around the Roman Empire that a language developed, an imperial cult language for the worship of the emperor. For example, the word *gospel*. The same word the Bible uses, old and new testament. "Good news" became the description, the word for the announcement of the birth of a new emperor, or the coronation of the new emperor, or the victory of an emperor. "Son of god" became an official title for the emperor. "Savior," a common description on coins and other inscriptions as Caesar was given credit for bringing peace and prosperity to his empire. And there was another phrase: "peace and security." Rome brought peace and security, or so she claimed. I've seen an altar with the words "peace" on one side and "security" on the other, where you would make an offering to the emperor for being the son of god savior who brought peace and security.

APPLICATION/ TAKEAWAYS:

- ✓ Tit for tat relationship between Thessalonica and Rome as an Upside-Down reality. How is it similar and different from the Kingdom of God?
- ✓ Caesar's good works vs Christ's body's good works - Matthew 5:14-16; Ephesians 2:8-10; Philippians 1:6; 2 Timothy 3:16-17
- ✓ What is Jesus' divine pose? John 13
- ✓ What do we give up, compromise, pay for this world's benefactions?
- ✓ Caesar's gospel vs Jesus' Gospel? What are the counterfeits? Luke 2:8-14

➤ Paul comes to Thessalonica and reasons from the Scriptures

So let's turn in the story and discover what happened when Paul came here. Hear it.

Acts 17:1-3

It's an important phrase [(reasoned with them from the Scriptures)], this is Paul's sword. This is his weapon that he brings to town. That's Luke's summary of Paul's message, so I can imagine what Paul is saying. 'There's a Messiah, a Savior King born, just like the prophets promised. Had a miraculous conception. Born in Bethlehem, as the scriptures say. Came to die, to suffer so that others could become part of His kingdom. And then ascended to be seated at the right hand of God Himself, Lord and King of all, and He invites us to become a part of that kingdom by doing His will. His name? Jesus.'

And I can see him here in Thessaloniki getting excited and saying, 'A kingdom to us Jews is not just the place the king rules. A kingdom is where the king's will is done. And His kingdom will come here in Thessaloniki, as and more of you do this, block by block, street by street, house by house, moment by moment, the kingdom of the king will come!'

But he was in Thessaloniki. Can you imagine some of their reactions? Paul brings the gospel. 'Oh, Caesar, right?' 'No, Jesus.' 'Jesus?' 'Yes! He was born miraculously, the Son of God!' 'Oh, Claudius, in Rome-' 'No, Jesus! He died to be your Savior!' 'Oh, I know that's the emperor.' 'No! Jesus! Then He ascended to be seated at the right hand of God, Lord and King.' 'Oh, now I KNOW you're-' 'No. Jesus! And he promises you shalom in your relationship to Him and asks you to extend shalom by doing His will everywhere you go. And with everyone you interact.' 'And that's Not the emperor?' 'No! It's Jesus!'

➤ A city in turmoil

Acts 17:4-10 (ESV)

I love it! Their teaching, maybe they didn't even criticize Caesar, implied that Caesar isn't king! Jesus is! And His kingdom can come every time you do His will as one who has been saved by the Son of God. And a church was born. The kingdom came to Thessaloniki. And much as Alexander had gone east, the gospel, the good news of the Kingdom of Heaven, came west.

APPLICATION/ TAKEAWAYS:

- ✓ Talk about the 3 kingdoms: Rome, Darkness and Heaven
- ✓ What is the nature of the kingdom of darkness?
- ✓ Why were the rulers and people threatened? What was the accusation that threw the city into turmoil? Acts 17:7
- ✓ Are we willing to upset the status quo? Acts 17:5
- ✓ Why did this incident pan out differently than Philippi where they were beaten, arrested, miraculously rescued?

➤ **Are we armed to bring the gospel of Christ's kingdom to our world?**

The gospel of the kingdom will always have conflict with the gospel of the kingdoms of this world. You see, the caesars are still here. Not the Roman Caesar anymore, but the Caesar of whatever a culture glorifies. And often it's those Hellenistic things of power, pleasure, leisure, accomplishment, accumulation, appearance, and self.

So what about us? You see, I stood there this morning thinking, we are the Alexanders. We've hidden in the safety of our churches long enough. We've been afraid to go into the agoras of a broken world long enough. And we've got to extend ourselves out like Alexander boldly heading off to fill the Kingdom.

And we've got to be fully armed. Are you fully armed? Do you have the helmet of salvation? And if you have the helmet of salvation and believe in Jesus, are you a streaker? I think most Christians are streakers. They want the helmet of salvation but the rest of it is too much work so they run around stark naked. So are you fully armed? Do you have the helmet of salvation? Have you worked on the breastplate of righteousness and faith and hope? You wear the belt of truth? The gospel, your sandals? Do you carry the sword, and have you learned to use it like those Greek soldiers who spread the kingdom of this world. And if you have, then I invite you to hear the good news! Not Caesar. That Jesus the Son of God is the Savior of the world. Ascended seated at the right hand of God Himself. Lord and King. Bringing peace, shalom, and eternal security.

And now, He calls you as His kingdom of priests to go out there and take back from the kingdoms of this world what's rightfully His. One inch at a time! Everytime you obey God in your personal walk, in your business life, your professional life, in your family life, in your church life, even while you're on vacation, you take one square inch for Him as his kingdom comes here as it's already in heaven. And everytime you choose not to, you give it back to Caesar and it isn't Caesar's.

Paul came to Thessaloniki and challenged these Jews and God-fearers and complete pagans to become citizens of a new kingdom, a kingdom of shalom that comes not with sarisa, those long pikes, and the blood they brought, but it comes by sharing and living the Word of God. Fellow members Jesus' phalanx, draw our weapons. Let's go spread the empire. Come.

APPLICATION/ TAKEAWAYS:

- ✓ Freedom, liberty, justice as characteristics of God vs. deifying the characteristics
- ✓ Spiritual warfare, one inch at a time! What do our battles look like - **REALLY?**
- ✓ What happens when we aren't walking in step with the Spirit?
- ✓ How do we wear the full Armor of God, and not just pick the easy pieces?
- ✓ What did Paul and Silas immediately do after leaving Thessalonica under cover of darkness? Acts 17:10-12. Is that our way of walking in step with the Spirit?



New Song
Community Church

WEEK 2

APPLICATION/ TAKEAWAYS:

- ✓ Giving to Caesar - what does Jesus mean when he tells us to give to Caesar what is Caesar's?
Luke 20:19-26
- ✓ Being Jesus' Phalanx - How do we honor God as Jesus instructs?
- ✓ In depth discussion of spiritual armor and spiritual war - Eph. 6
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Ephesians 6:10–20

2 Corinthians 10:3–5

2 Corinthians 11:12–15

1 John 5:3–5