

# **A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church**

**By Eric Howell**

**Philippians 4:1-9**

**November 2, 2008**

Here are the Top 10 Baby Names in 2007.

For girls: Elizabeth, Hannah Abigail, Olivia, Sophia, Madison, Ava, Emma, Isabella, Emily.

For boys: Andrew, Matthew, William, Anthony, Christopher, Daniel, Joshua, Ethan, Michael, Jacob.

Now consider these names:

Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, Nero, Galba, Otho, Vitellius, Vespasian, Titus, Domitian, Nerva, Trajan.

These names may not mean much to you. But they meant everything one place and time. These are the names of the men who sat in the seat of power over the world, as they knew it. These are the Caesars of Rome in the first century. Each of them ruled over and waged battle for the borders of an empire that stretched from England to India. Their power was unequalled and unrivaled in the world. The poet Virgil gave Rome the myth that Rome itself started in heaven with the gods. The poet Homer gave Rome the claim that its lineage was ancient to the foundation of the world. Its promises were prophesied; its victories were divine. And therefore its emperor, its Caesar, was called a Son of God. The first Caesar, Augustus, and those after him took the titles of 'Savior' and 'Lord' because they brought peace to the earth.

The Caesars wielded absolute power over a vast multitude of nation-states, tribes, and peoples. If you were one of the conquered peoples, you benefited from expanded trade, relative peace with your neighbors who were also under Roman rule, and from roads and other advanced civilization. As long as you paid your taxes, did not cause a stir, sent your sons to serve in the empire's army, and acknowledged the Caesar as Lord, you were fine.

Sometime after 30 A.D., a group of people who came to be known as "Followers of the Way," and later as "Christians," attracted the attention of Rome. Why? Instead of calling Caesar "Savior and Lord" they refused, claiming that some itinerant Jewish carpenter from Galilee who the local Roman administration supposedly took care of was the true Savior and Lord and was himself the "Son of God," the bringer of the kingdom of peace. These claims, and precisely the language they used to describe this man were direct challenges to the emperor and the empire.

The problem was small and containable to start with under Tiberius. But by the time Caligula, Claudius, and Nero came to power, things were getting out of hand. These "Christians" would not stay in line. No matter how many of them you threatened with death, they would not change their confession. No matter how many of them you killed, they just kept on. The Romans took care of the leaders of this bunch. Men named Peter and Paul and others were exterminated, but the followers, gathered in homes all across the empire, were gaining strength. They even began to say that "the blood of the martyrs was the seed of the church." And who could argue with them? Something had to be done. Unbelievable. Without taking up arms themselves, without raising an

army, this movement of unarmed, scattered, loosely organized, confessional followers of some backwoods messiah was undermining the image of the power of Rome.

Domitian came to the throne with a plan to reassert the divine status of the Caesar. Under him, Rome's Caesar was more closely linked with the god Jupiter, and religious persecution intensified. The ancient historian Eusebius wrote, "Many were the victims of Domitian's appalling cruelty. At Rome great numbers of men distinguished by birth and attainments were for no reason at all banished from the country and their property confiscated. Finally, he showed himself the successor of Nero in enmity and hostility toward God. There is ample evidence that at that time the apostle and evangelist John was still alive, and because of his testimony to the word of God was sentenced to confinement on the island of Patmos." But God found him there and gave him a vision of hope in a time of hopelessness, some light in a dark, dark time.

John described the vision he had and someone later named it Revelation. Somehow the revelation made its way off the island and into the hands of Christians, where it was read in hushed voices in little churches all over, who were meeting and worshipping their God in defiance of Rome. The writing was strange and wild, and on the occasions when Roman soldiers found a copy of this letter, it didn't make much sense to them, just sounded like ecstatic nonsense. But it wasn't nonsense. It was a message from God to hurting, troubled, desperate people. There's always a Rome. Every Rome wants our complete devotion and works toward it or wars toward it. There's always a Rome and Rome always wants all of you. The vision was not naïve about the strength of our enemies on earth, but was hopeful and sure about the greater power of heaven.

So there's this one scene in this vision where there's this throne, and people from all over the world are gathered in front of it, praising the one sitting on the throne. It is exactly the dream of the Caesar. From Augustus to Trajan, Caesars went to bed every night dreaming of the day when their people from all over the empire would gather as the world's greatest army to give their lives, literally their lives, in service to their Savior and Lord, the Son of God, the Caesar. The peoples gathered from every tribe and every nation are there, before the throne which is occupied by One sitting there. You never get a really good look at His face, but he has the appearance of jasper and carnelian, and around the throne is a rainbow-like emerald. Around the throne were 24 other thrones, seated on which were 24 elders each with a crown of the earth. They break into song and cast their crowns before the throne. Even the rulers of the earth bow before this One, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Caesar must have smiled as he imagined their songs of praise to him. Songs like, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty, who was and is and is to come!" and "Worthy are you our Lord and God to receive glory and honor and power." The Caesar thought they were singing about him. John's vision. Rome's dream. But this dream of the Christians finally getting straight and giving Rome their ultimate praise and allegiance turns into a nightmare.

The first clue that something is strange here is who is standing beside the throne. Standing beside the throne in Caesar's dream is a conquering general who has proved his bravery in battle by vanquishing enemies with the sword and leading men with terror, but in John's vision, beside the throne is a lamb standing, as though it had been slain. In the place of strength, weakness. In the place of domination, sacrifice. And look back out at the people. Wait. What kind of army is this? They are not dressed in the armor of Rome, with shields, and helmets with the red poofy stuff on top. They are in robes, gleaming white robes that have been supernaturally washed by the blood of the lamb. It is as if the cleanliness of the robes on the outside is shining with the holiness of the souls of those wearing them. And where are their swords? In the place of swords, they are holding palm branches. Palm branches? Palm branches are the sign that the war is over. Victory is won.

What kind of army is this? Celebrating before the battle? At peace with one another? And then, still bewildered by all of this, in a moment everyone falls on their faces, the multitudes, the elders, even angels fall on their faces and worship not the Caesar but their God, giving to God all that Caesar craves, “Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever. Amen!”

This final blow is devastating to Caesar. The people cry, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb.” Inconceivable. You can kill them and subdue them. You can inflict all manner of trials and tribulations in their lives, but you can’t discourage them. You can’t diminish them. Death or life, angels or demons, things present or things to come, height, depth, nor anything else in all creation can separate these people from the love of their God in the one they call Christ Jesus their Lord.” This isn’t an army of young robust men for Rome. It’s a church with all kinds of people: young, old, male, female, every beautiful color of skin ever seen; who have been through some really rough times, great tribulations.

Who are these multitudes? Look closer at the crowds. You may recognize some of the faces. Over there is Ignatius and others, who were fed to the beasts. There’s Appolonius who was beheaded. There’s Blandina who was tortured relentlessly before her death. And there are others. There are others who were not from the time of the Rome of ancient days. But they fought their own fights. They struggled and endured great tribulation in their own lives. There is an old lady; do you know her name? She fought cancer. They said she lost, but she looks victorious today. There is a youth who thought life wasn’t worth living. The front rows are all children who never had the chance to wonder. They know the words to the song. They’ve always known. The words are embedded in their hearts.

There’s always Rome. There’s going to be something that wants to diminish you, threaten your faith, undermine hope, make you believe you are less than God believes you are. There’s something that wants to define you. Whatever it is, it is less than God. For the powers and principalities of this earth, their nightmare is that you share this vision. For cancer, for sickness and disease, for war and hatred, for greed and lust, for empires and terrorists. For the powers of this world, for the Romes of our world, this is a nightmare. You don’t run our lives. You don’t own us. You don’t determine our reality. You don’t get our worship, our adoration, our fear. You are not on our throne. We are free. Even you, death. Where is your victory? Where is your sting?

Augustine dreamt of the city of God, “There we shall rest and we shall see; we shall see and we shall love; we shall love and we shall praise. That is what shall be in the end without end. For what is our end but to arrive at the kingdom which has no end?”

The song that the multitudes sing is ongoing in the eternal now of heaven. When we sing and pray and worship here on earth, we join our voices to their unending hymn of praise to the Only One who protects, provides, guides, saves, and wipes away every tear from our eyes.