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Session 3 - Religious and Social Values

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Hey, welcome to The Explainer. You know, to really get a handle on the birth of Christianity, you can't just look at the idea itself. You have to understand the world it exploded into, and what a world it was.

A time of massive empires, huge identity crises, and, well, a kind of marketplace of beliefs, all competing for people's hearts and minds. Think about it. This was the question on everyone's mind in the first century.

How do you hold on to who you are when the world seems dead set against you? Especially when you're living in the shadow of this colossal empire that feels like it controls everything. Not just your politics, but your very sense of self. Right.

So let's really get into this. Because here's the thing. To understand any new idea, you absolutely have to understand the world it landed in.

And in the first century, that world was completely dominated by one name, Rome. I mean, from the foggy shores of Britain all the way to the deserts of the Middle East, this one superpower was calling all the shots. And we're not just talking about military power.

This was a cultural force. They called it Hellenization. This wave of Greek-influenced culture touched every single part of daily life.

It was quite literally inescapable. Now for the Jewish people in particular, this was a massive problem. Living under foreign, pagan rule created this deep, profound spiritual and political crisis.

It forced them to ask some really tough questions about their faith, their identity, and their future. And this was the big one, the burning question. What does it actually mean to be God's chosen people when it looks like God's promises have been broken? I mean, their scriptures had promised them a king from their own lineage, from the line of David.

But when they looked up at who was in charge, it was a foreign emperor. And that's the central tension right there. The promise was for a holy king, one of their own.

The reality? Caesar, a pagan emperor whom people were often expected to worship as a god. This massive contradiction created this urgent need for answers, and it fueled that whole dynamic marketplace of beliefs we were talking about. So, what was for sale in this marketplace? What were the popular philosophical products you could pick up? If you were searching for meaning back then, you actually had a bunch of different options to check out.

Okay, one of the biggest ideas on the shelf was something called Platonic dualism, and it's a huge one. Basically, it taught that the physical world, everything you can see and touch,

including your own body, was just a shadow. It was an imperfect, maybe even evil, copy of the real reality, which was purely spiritual.

And this belief had a really profound consequence. Think about it. If the spirit is good and matter is bad, then salvation isn't about fixing or redeeming the world.

It's about escaping it. The ultimate goal became breaking free from the prison of your physical body and getting to that spiritual realm. But that wasn't your only option.

You also had Stoicism, which got its name from the Greek word for a pillar, a stoa. The idea was to be like that pillar, unmoved by whatever life throws at you. Then there was Cynicism, which was all about radically rejecting mainstream society.

And then you had Gnosticism, which kind of took that dualism we just talked about and added a twist. You could escape the evil material world, but only if you were part of an elite few who had access to secret knowledge or Gnosis. So that's what was going on in the wider Greco-Roman world.

But how did the Jewish world respond? Well, different groups came up with their own unique strategies for trying to stay faithful while living under the thumb of a foreign empire. And you can really see the different approaches laid out here. You had the Pharisees, who focused on intense moral purity through the law, kind of separating themselves spiritually.

Then you had the Sadducees, the wealthy elite, who chose to just accommodate Rome to protect their status. The Essenes went even further and just left. They withdrew into the desert completely.

And then you had the Zealots, whose answer was much, much simpler. Fight. So into this chaotic mix, you've got Roman power, Greek philosophy, Jewish hope, and a lot of frustration.

A brand new message arrives. And the really shocking thing about it was that it used language that was already super, super familiar to absolutely everyone. Yeah, these phrases, Lord and God, Savior of the world, these weren't just nice things to say about someone.

In the first century, these were official state-sanctioned titles, and they were reserved for the single most powerful man on the entire planet. So who was it? If you'd asked literally anyone living at the time, the answer would have been immediate. It would have been obvious.

No question about it. Caesar, the Roman Emperor. He was the Lord.

He was the God. He was the Savior of the world. And Emperor worship wasn't just some weird fringe thing.

It was a widespread civic duty. Really. It was how you showed your allegiance, your gratitude, to the power that brought peace and stability to the world.

Okay, so this is the absolutely crucial point. When the very first Christians started using these exact same words- Lord, Savior, God, and even the word Gospel, which meant the

good news of the Emperor's reign- and they applied them to this crucified Jewish teacher named Jesus, wow, that was an incredibly bold, incredibly subversive act. This wasn't just religious talk.

This was a direct political and spiritual challenge to the ultimate authority on earth. What they were doing was making a declaration. They were saying that the true Lord and Savior of the world wasn't the guy on the throne in Rome.

I mean, that's a revolutionary claim. It completely reframed the whole concept of power, of salvation, of what good news even meant. They were saying the real story of the world's salvation wasn't happening in the Emperor's palace, but through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

So, thinking about this, if the word Gospel actually started out as a political term, how does that change the way we read the story of Christianity? You know, understanding this context is so key. It shows us that the New Testament isn't just a collection of abstract theological ideas. It's a set of documents that were forged in a world of intense conflict, fierce competition, and a radical, subversive hope that dared to proclaim a different king, a different kingdom, and a completely different kind of power.