

Introduction: There's a New King in Town

Paul, a servant of...Jesus Christ our Lord.

(Romans 1:1, 4)

Paul's letter to the Romans is not just the longest surviving letter from the ancient world. It was also the most dangerous. It was written to a city where a murderer built his reign on the corpses of his rivals. Ten years later, because of the message of Romans, Paul's own corpse would be added to his ever-growing pile.

The Emperor Nero had come to the throne in October 54 AD when his mother assassinated his stepfather, the Emperor Claudius. She had heard rumours that Claudius was about to disinherit Nero in favour of his son from a previous marriage, so she persuaded court officials to poison him before he could. Nothing must stand in the way of her sixteen-year-old son's aspirations to the throne.

Nero quickly followed his mother's example and made murder the hallmark of his insecure reign. Only weeks after becoming the most powerful ruler in the world, he consolidated his position by poisoning his stepbrother. In the years that followed, he murdered his mother, two of his wives and any nobleman who posed a threat. The Roman historian Suetonius tells us that Nero "showed neither discrimination nor moderation in putting to death whoever he pleased on any pretext whatever."¹ That's why when Paul wrote from Corinth to the Christians at

¹ Suetonius, writing in c.120 AD in his *Life of Nero* (37). Nero did not kill his mother until two years after Paul wrote Romans, but he murdered his stepbrother and many noblemen almost straightaway.

Rome in the spring of 57 AD, his letter was as dangerous as throwing a flaming torch into a room filled with gunpowder.²

Paul claimed that there was one true King and that it wasn't Nero. Many of us miss this because we skim over Paul's choice of words in his opening verses, but three key words cannot have failed to capture the attention of his original Roman readers.

First, he used the Greek word *euangelion*, which means *gospel*. This was a technical word used by the Caesars themselves to proclaim the news that they had fathered an heir or had won a great victory on the battlefield. An inscription in the ruins of the Greek city Priene which dates back to 9 BC declares that "When Caesar appeared he exceeded the hopes of all who received the gospel... The birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning of the gospel regarding him for the world." Paul therefore uses the word *euangelion* as a deliberate challenge to Caesar's vain boast. The real Gospel was not the good news of Rome regarding Nero, but "the gospel of God...regarding his Son".

Second, Paul used the word *kurios*, or *Lord*. This was the word used by the translators of the Old Testament into Greek to translate God's name *Yahweh*, but it was also a title that the Roman emperors used of themselves. One of Nero's officials illustrates this by referring to him as the *Kurios* in Acts 25:26, so Paul's letter told the Romans a dangerously different story. He announced the reign of "Jesus Christ our Lord" and promised in Romans 10:9 that "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Kurios,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."

Third, Paul used the word *christos*, meaning *Christ* or *Messiah*. This was the word used in the Greek Old Testament to refer to King David's heir who would one day take his throne and establish God's Kingdom which would last forever. Daniel 7 had even prophesied that this Messiah would face up to

² The context of 15:25-26 links this letter to Acts 20:2-3, as does Paul's mention in 16:1, 23 of Phoebe from nearby Cenchræa and the Corinthians Gaius and Erastus (1 Corinthians 1:14; 2 Timothy 4:20).

the iron-toothed Roman Empire and destroy it along with its boastful ruler.³ Now Paul claimed that this Messiah had come: Jesus of Nazareth. He was telling the Romans there was a new King in town.⁴

Stop for a moment and think how risky that was. Jesus had been dragged before a Roman judge under the charge that “*he opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Christ, a king.*” When the Roman judge hesitated, Jesus’ enemies reminded him that “*If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar.*” The judge had therefore ordered that Jesus be crucified by a team of Roman soldiers, wearing a mocking crown of thorns and under a sign which told everyone what Rome thought of his claim to be “*the King of the Jews*.”⁵ Now Paul was claiming that God had raised this same Jesus to life, and in doing so had revealed him as the true Lord and King of the universe.⁶

Nero was emperor because the Praetorian Guard had supported him when he stood over the dead body of his adoptive father. Paul responded that Jesus was the true King because God had supported him when he raised his dead body back to life. Nero’s first act as emperor had been to deify Claudius and claim to be *divi filius*, Latin for *the son of a god*. Paul responded that it was actually Jesus who “*through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God.*”⁷ This threat was not

³ The four empires of Daniel 7:1–7 belong in turn to Babylon, Medo-Persia, Macedon and Rome.

⁴ Paul never actually uses the word “king” in Romans, since first-century Romans used it to describe their puppet rulers. To clarify the kind of king Jesus is, he uses the far more dangerous word *kurios* over forty times.

⁵ Luke 23:2; John 19:12; Matthew 27:27–31, 37.

⁶ The Greek word *horizō* in 1:4 means either *to appoint* or *to mark out*. Since Jesus is God’s eternal Son, Paul must be telling us that God marked him out to the entire world as his Son when he raised him from the dead.

⁷ “*The Spirit of holiness*” is simply a Jewish way of saying “*the Holy Spirit*”.

lost on Paul’s enemies, who accused him of “*defying Caesar’s decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus.*”⁸

Paul begins his letter to the Romans by telling them that *the new King saves*, both objectively and in day-to-day experience (chapters 1–5 and 6–8). He then settles the conflict between Jewish and Gentile Christians by explaining to both groups that *the new King has a plan* (chapters 9–11). Next, in light of this, he gets specific about what it means for both groups to accept that *the new King is Lord* (12:1–15:13). Finally, he outlines his plans to preach the Gospel across the Western Mediterranean and warns his Roman readers that *the new King is advancing* (15:14–16:27).⁹

That’s why we mustn’t view Romans as a theological treatise that calls people to make a private response to an offer of personal salvation. Nero’s ambassadors did not cross the Empire to encourage his subjects to experience the benefits of choosing him as their Lord. They simply announced that Nero was emperor, whether their hearers liked it or not, and that they needed to submit to his rule or face the deadly consequences. In the same way, Paul wrote this letter and sent it into Nero’s backyard to proclaim that Jesus Christ was Lord, and they needed to surrender. Nero could execute Paul ten years later in Rome as one of the last desperate acts of his disintegrating reign,¹⁰ but he couldn’t resist his all-conquering message. Even today, when people read Romans, they discover that King Jesus really is Lord and that his plan to save all nations is nearing its grand finale.

So let’s get ready to experience the message of Romans for ourselves. Whatever the world may have told us and

⁸ Acts 17:6–7.

⁹ Some people object to the idea that Jesus is the “new” King. Surely he has always been the Lord? Yes, but Acts 2:36 and Philippians 2:9–11 are clear that he also “became” Lord in a new way through the Gospel.

¹⁰ See *Straight to the Heart of Acts* for how Luke’s defence of the Gospel helped save Paul from being executed in Rome earlier in 62 AD.

whatever false gospels we may have believed, it is time for us to experience God's Gospel concerning his Son. It is time for us to wake up to what it means when Paul tells us that there is a new King in town.

It's Personal (1:1–7)

...the gospel of God...regarding his Son.

(Romans 1:1, 3)

Romans may be brilliant, but it isn't easy reading. It is the sixth of Paul's thirteen New Testament letters and the only one he wrote to a church he had neither planted nor visited,¹ which often makes it feel more like a lecture than a letter. Paul livens up his monologue by heckling himself with questions, and he tries to build bridges by naming lots of mutual friends in chapter 16, but none of this can stop Romans from feeling like a theological essay. It lacks the intimacy of 1 Thessalonians or the tailor-made teaching of 1 Corinthians. But don't let that fool you that this letter isn't personal.

Romans isn't primarily about sin or righteousness or justification or the role of Israel. It is about *"the gospel of God ...regarding his Son"*. In case we miss that Paul's message is primarily about a person, he also urges Timothy in another letter to *"Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel."*²

We need to note this as we start Romans, because so many people read the letter as a Gospel formula that *sin plus the cross plus repentance equals justification*. Unless we grasp that the Gospel is about a Jewish man, descended from King David, who was revealed as God's Son when he raised him from the dead,

¹ He had not visited the Colossian church either, but at least he had planted it through one of his converts.

² 2 Timothy 2:8.

then we will misunderstand Paul's teaching in 10:9.³ We will treat it as a call to respond to the Gospel by following a formula, when in fact it is a call to respond to the Lord Jesus as a person.

Paul was not saying anything new to the Romans. This was, after all, how the Roman church began. Its earliest members had been there on the Day of Pentecost to hear the first Gospel sermon in Acts 2. After eight verses that responded to the crowd's immediate question, Peter launched into a message that began with *"Jesus of Nazareth..."* and which ended fifteen verses later with *"God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."*

Other church members had been there when Peter preached a Gospel sermon to a crowded room of Romans in Acts 10. Cornelius gave him carte blanche to preach anything he wanted – *"We are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us"* – and Peter chose to give a ten-verse biography of Jesus, which recounted his baptism, his experience of the Holy Spirit, his healing ministry, his death and resurrection, and his post-resurrection appearances. He told them Jesus was Lord and that unless they received his forgiveness they would face his judgment.

So when Paul tells the Roman Christians that the Gospel is personal, he is not telling them anything particularly new. What is new is that he clarifies for them why conversion means more than assenting to certain Christian doctrines. When the Gospel is presented as a series of propositions by which listeners can escape God's judgment and go to heaven when they die, it creates stillborn, self-centred "converts" who are very different from the ones Paul describes in these first seven verses.

The Gospel we share affects how converts *see themselves*. The essence of sin is to act as if the world revolves around

³ Paul stresses that Jesus is both man and God by two similar phrases in verses 3 and 4: *kata sarka* and *kata pneuma*, or *according to the flesh* and *according to the Spirit*.

us, so an impersonal gospel fails to deal with the root of the problem. It tells us that we are so precious that God sacrificed his Son because he couldn't bear to see people like us die. It pleads with us to accept God's salvation with a promise that he will improve our lives if we ask him to come into our lives. Those who respond to this "gospel" rise from their knees thinking that God just made a transaction with *them*, so they sit back and see whether he makes good on his promise to make their lives better. In contrast, those who respond to Paul's Gospel that Jesus is Lord rise from their knees understanding that they just made a transaction with God. They repent of acting as if the world revolves around themselves and accept nothing short of a Copernican Revolution in their thinking: they confess they are mere planets which must now revolve around God's Son.

To stress this, Paul begins his letter with a Greek phrase that was very offensive in Roman culture: "*Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus*". When Tacitus, the great historian of Nero's reign, insults people he tells his readers they have "*the mind of a slave*",⁴ but Paul says that this is the essence of what it means to follow Christ. Praying a prayer cannot help us unless we accept that we now "*belong to Jesus Christ*" and authenticate our prayer with "*the obedience that comes from faith*".⁵ Responding to the Gospel means surrendering to King Jesus.

The Gospel we share also affects how converts *see their mission*. If they respond to a message that God wants to meet their needs, they become Christian consumers. They share testimonies that focus on what caused them to cry out to God and on what their decision has saved them *from*. They do not echo Paul's humility when he says three times in these seven

⁴ He does this as much to noblemen (*Histories*, 5.9) as to former slaves (*Annals*, 15.54).

⁵ Verses 5 and 6. Paul stresses the link between faith and obedience again in 15:18-19 and 16:26.

verses that it is God who calls us, or his excitement over what this means he has been set apart *for*.⁶

The Gospel we share also affects how converts *expect God to use them* to fulfil his purposes. If they are told that the Gospel is a message all about them, their involvement in mission will lead to either pride or despair because they will assume that success depends on their own hard work. They don't grasp that it is "*the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets*" countless centuries before they were even born, or that Jesus makes us successful "*through him and for his name's sake*". They cannot understand Paul's confidence in verse 13 that he will always be fruitful wherever he goes. They forget that when Paul finally made it to Rome he simply "*taught about the Lord Jesus Christ*".⁷ Luke also summarizes Paul's message in Rome as "*the kingdom of God*". They think the Gospel is a set of propositions, but Paul insists it is a person.

John Piper puts it this way:

*When we ask about God's design we are too prone to describe it with ourselves at the centre of God's affections. We may say, for example, his design is to redeem the world. Or to save sinners. Or to restore creation. Or the like. But God's saving designs are penultimate, not ultimate. Redemption, salvation, and restoration are not God's ultimate goal. These he performs for the sake of something greater.*⁸

He does it for his own glory through King Jesus, our Lord, as Paul tells us in this deeply personal letter about God's Gospel regarding his Son.

⁶ The passive word *klētos*, or *called*, in verses 1, 6 and 7 sets Paul up for his teaching about God's initiative in chapters 9-11.

⁷ Acts 28:31.

⁸ John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (1986).