Romans Unplugged

Romans Unplugged

Reading Paul's Letter to the Romans in the Twenty-First Century

LES BRIGHTON

Foreword by
Philip Yancey

WIPF & STOCK • Eugene, Oregon

ROMANS UNPLUGGED
Reading Paul's Letter to the Romans in the Twenty-First Century

Wipf & Stock
An Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers
199 W. 8th Ave., Suite 3
Eugene, OR 97401

www.wipfandstock.com

PAPERBACK ISBN: 978-1-5326-9069-3
HARDCOVER ISBN: 978-1-5326-9070-9
EBOOK ISBN: 978-1-5326-9071-6

Manufactured in the U.S.A. 08/16/19

For Angela, beloved and faithful companion on the journey.

My task is to make room for God to come.

—Kierkegaard

Contents

Foreword

I met Les Brighton in 2003, on my first visit to New Zealand. Following his recommended route, I hiked in forests and jagged mountain ranges, and drove through rolling green hills dotted with sheep. At the time, that nation of stunning natural beauty had ten times as many sheep as people. Most Kiwis, as they call themselves, have a modest and humble—dare I say shepherd-like?—personality and Les, a warden of a Christian study center, fit the mold.

"Don't let the Kiwis fool you," an Australian later told me. "We Aussies are brash, kind of like you Americans. We think we're athletic and outdoorsy, but the Kiwis are the really tough ones. They started Outward Bound, and were the first to climb Mount Everest. They invented the sports of bungee jumping and black-water rafting—like white-water rafting, only done inside a cave, in the dark. We Aussies face lots of natural dangers: crocodiles, poisonous snakes and spiders, Tasmanian devils, killer jellyfish. New Zealand has none of those. So they have to contrive danger."

As Les recounted his exploits on treks in the Southern Alps, I came to appreciate his toughness. We connected immediately as lovers of nature and theology, for both of us a form of divine revelation. He later took a job with Canterbury University in Christchurch, as marketing director in charge of recruiting international students, and as a result visited my home in Colorado several times. One day we stumbled across a patch of rare Calypso orchids, which grow close to the forest floor. Les reacted as if we had found a solid gold nugget.

Another time, Les's visit coincided with a long season of clinical depression. He described his bouts with the recurring condition as we hiked on the hills behind my mountain home. I led him to a place where each spring a pair of red foxes raises a litter of kits. The parents have grown accustomed to me, and think it not at all strange that I stop in front of the den and whistle a greeting. Sometimes the young ones poke their faces out from a crevice in the rock, sniffing the air and staring at me with alert, shiny eyes. Sometimes I hear them scrabbling around inside. Sometimes I hear nothing.

I warned Les that he may see and hear nothing at all. "They're wild animals, you know," I said. "We're not in charge. It's up to the foxes whether they make an appearance or not."

A bold young fox did poke his nose out of the den that day, thrilling my visitor, and a few weeks later I received a letter from Les, back home in New Zealand. As he reflected on it, oddly enough, my comment about foxes helped him understand God. During the season of depression, sometimes God seemed as close as his wife or children. Sometimes he had no sense of God's presence, no faith to lean on. "God is wild, you know," he wrote. "We're not in charge."

A few years later a devastating earthquake hit Christchurch, Les's home city, destroying much of the downtown and tens of thousands of houses. "Everybody knows somebody who died or got injured," Les wrote me. "Angela [his wife] had taught at an English language school in one of the buildings that completely collapsed, so she knew almost all of the staff who died."

In the aftermath of reconstruction, the university eliminated Les's department. In typical fashion, he responded stoically. "Time to move on. The job never was my reason for living. I did get some extra pay, and that has given me the opportunity to do some writing, which has been my dream for a long time. I've started a book on Romans!"

Little did the Brightons know that their greatest challenge lay ahead. In less than a year Les was diagnosed with leukemia. Over the next months, which turned into years, he underwent a series of chemotherapy treatments that caused his health and energy to ebb and flow like a tide. He wrote a poem on that very simile, which begins:

> Spring, like a wave, catches one unawares, spray-shocks.
> Fluorescent-lit offices have no seasons. Townsfolk do not mark the tides.

The end of the poem alludes to his illness:

> The day is over. Log out, lock up, step outside.
> The deck rocks and bucks, the new leaves gather and surge
> The lungs fill as with a driving sou'wester.
> We are riding the tide, over the bar, into the open sea.

Les had already made a good start on his book on Romans when the illness hit. For the next five years, he worked in spurts when his strength allowed it, sometimes from a hospital. "The isolation room he's in is not all that bad," Angela wrote in the midst of one such stay. "Of course he can't get out and about but he has room for books and his computer. So long as he is feeling OK there are times when he can think and read. As well, he has a 'million dollar view' out his window—of the Avon River which runs through Christchurch, and on the other side the Botanic Gardens. Of course the challenge is 'feeling OK.' Fevers come and go."

Both Les and Angela wrote about their spiritual journey throughout the trial. Angela told of her raw faith, so unlike the experiences you hear about from testimonies in church: "You pray, and pray, and there are long stretches of time when nothing

happens . . ." Les, buoyed by his book project, expressed a more optimistic tone. As long as he could work, he stayed happy.

Romans is the most systematic treatment of "the big picture" in the entire Bible. The apostle Paul was writing to a sophisticated, erudite city, and the resulting letter has reverberated through the ages, working its effect on such notables as Augustine, Martin Luther, John Wesley, and Karl Barth. Yet Les was convinced that the average reader in modern times may be missing an essential point. "We think the letter is all about us and our salvation," he wrote. "But, surprise, Paul's letter is not all about us, it is first and foremost all about God." Les described the project in its early days:

> The title is *Romans Unplugged*. Our approach to Romans is so massively influenced by the theological amplifiers and mixers of many generations that it is hard to hear Paul himself amidst all the other noise. What I am attempting to do is gently unplug from all that later theology and help us all hear what the man with the guitar is actually singing.
>
> It's such a hugely pretentious thing to try to do. However, the necessary close engagement with the Greek text has proven to be extremely interesting and fruitful. You come to a particular passage already aware of what you will find there—but you're mistaken! The more you look for it the more it isn't there. So, if Paul is not saying that, what is he saying? The answer is tremendous.
>
> My ideal audience is the 20- and 30-year-olds for whom Romans is as yet unknown territory; who, unencumbered by the theological baggage, will read on excited to see what comes next, and into whose heart Paul's message will fall like water and like light.

Les began with the goal of commenting on every chapter of Romans. As the disease progressed, he lowered his sights to completing Romans 1–8. The prayers of friends kept him going. "Like the water and power and other services that run hidden under the streets of the city, maintaining its life, there is this hidden network of prayer and goodwill that, consciously or unconsciously, links person and person and God across communities and across the world. It is the spiritual breath of the planet: awesome to touch the edges of."

In June 2017, prospects looked very grave. All the arduous chemotherapy treatments had proved, in the end, ineffective. Doctors diagnosed Les's condition as terminal, and began speaking in terms of months rather than years of life. "This is a serious email, but I don't want it to be a somber one," Les wrote. "My heart is full of gratitude for so many things, including these friendships, some of them extending over a lifetime. I don't believe death is the end, for any of us. And in the meantime, there is still life to live, friends to meet, things to do."

In August Les wrote in triumph that he had finished the book's chapter on Romans 8. "If I hadn't been well enough to bring things to that point then the whole five years' work would have fallen to the ground. I'm relieved, of course, but also very

happy with how it has come together . . . how you start with open hands—and God fills them. It is work but it is also grace."

In that final sentence, Les provides a neat summary of the letter to the Romans. I think of the apostle Paul making notes, outlining, composing, and finally editing the words in this magnificently compressed theological statement, a work that became a gracious gift to us. I think of God's own plan for humanity, an experiment begun in love but that would involve the hardest work of all, the incarnation and crucifixion, a seeming defeat that led to a gift of grace, the salvation of the world. And I think of Les, propped up in a hospital bed, fighting with his febrile brain to squeeze out this timeless message for us modern readers. May it fall like water and like light.

I am recounting the human struggle from which this book emerged because Les would not—he's a Kiwi, after all. You will judge the book by its own merits. As I read it, I hear the boyish voice of Les himself, the guide who pointed out a site not far from his home used for the filming of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and who exclaimed over yet another Calypso orchid sprouting from dead pine straw in Colorado. I am amazed that my friend sustained such vibrant enthusiasm as he worked on this book of theology while battling a terminal illness.

The whole of creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time, Paul wrote in Romans 8. That metaphor may be the most appropriate of all. I recall my first visit to Christchurch, a lovely city of parks and cathedral spires named for Christ Church, Oxford, a gateway to the paradise of New Zealand's South Island—now a city known mainly for its destructive earthquakes and a mass slaughter in a mosque. And I remember my life-giving friendship with Les himself, and the groaning of his own body as he valiantly fought, and finally succumbed to, disease.

Les's last personal email to me closed with a quotation from William Butler Yeats's poem "The Lake Isle of Innisfree":

> And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,
> Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;
> There midnight's all a-glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
> And evening full of the linnet's wings."

Les added his own line: "And look at that band of glory high up and far away in the distance." He died on October 25, 2017, truly believing that, as in childbirth, the pains of all creation would yield new life. This book is his legacy.

Philip Yancey

Preface

I didn't choose Romans, Romans chose me. Thirty years ago as a follow-up to a university dissertation I decided to read through the New Testament letters in order to be sure that I hadn't missed some obvious thing that would invalidate my thesis. But in the event I didn't get past Romans. Using a worn paperback copy of the New English Bible I read the letter through almost at a gulp. And at the end I thought, "Now *that* is interesting!" It was as if I had stepped into an unknown world. I started to read it again, more slowly. And again. Only after six months of reading and rereading did I feel that Romans had released me—for the time.

Over the years that followed the letter continued to haunt me. I preached it and lectured it. There was a thesis, a conference paper, and more reading and thinking. Finally I felt I was beginning to understand what Paul was saying. It blew me away. I began to long to share some of the wonderful things I was discovering. If that was to happen, though, I was sure about one thing. Whatever I wrote had to be written for ordinary people. Of the making of commentaries for specialists there is no end. But where were the books which would enable twenty-first century people to be as challenged and empowered as the little Roman congregation Paul wrote to had been by his letter? I decided to try to write a page-turner on Romans. It was only later that I realised that Paul was doing the very same thing.

As it has happened, I have not been able to complete the full exposition all the way to the end of Paul's letter. Two years into the book's writing I was diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia. As a consequence I fell off the planet for a year, coming through a bone marrow transplant and the subsequent long convalescence into what appeared at the time to be full recovery.

Getting back to the desk I had a much clearer idea of what the book should be. Especially I realised that there had to be a translation. The text needs to be on the page; besides, my experience with the first three chapters had taught me that you can't write a book where you are continually saying "I know your translation says one thing, but what Paul actually said was quite another." I went back too and re-wrote the main text from the beginning, making it tighter and leaner, and above all ensuring it was true to what Paul actually wrote. It was a voyage of discovery: so much of what the tradition had taught me was in the letter vanished like smoke—and what *was* there

was astounding. Engagement with Romans has transformed my understanding of the good news.

After three years of full health my blood counts took a lurch again. It soon became clear that this was no blip: the leukemia had returned. As I write all of the interventions that are possible in this situation have failed. I am living out the final months of my life. In the light of that I am so grateful to have been able to bring the exposition through to the end of chapter 8 of Paul's letter, which in some ways is a natural break point. As I've worked hard to complete the text, his reminder in that chapter that we must suffer with Jesus if we are to share his glory and the discovery—new to me—that the context of the "Abba!" cry is Gethsemane, have not been matters of merely theoretical interest.

In J. R. R. Tolkien's novel *The Lord of the Rings,* an unremarkable character in an unremarkable land finds himself possessed of a ring of power, indeed the one ruling ring that the Dark Lord is bending all of his energies to find. "Keep it safe," the wizard Gandalf tells him. "You have to remember, the ring *wants* to be found." In the service of a very different Lord I have over many months now felt the material in this book trembling under my hand, longing to be set free to do its work in the world. It is a remarkable feeling, nothing to do with any human skill or desire. The good news of Jesus Messiah *wants* to be found.

And so, not without a pang, I commit this book back into the hand of the One who gave me the task so long ago. "My Word shall not return to me empty but shall achieve all that I sent it to do." Yes.

Les Brighton
October 2017

Acknowledgements

The following people were part of a reference group that commented, often in extremely helpful detail, on early drafts of chapters 1–3 in particular: Matt Button, Claire Brighton, Dave Festing, Alan Harkness, David Pickering, Paul Trebilco, and Matt Watts.

Others who have sharpened my thinking about particular issues: Ron Hay, Brett Mann, and David Bryant.

I once put Philip Yancey in a position where he felt honor-bound to have a look at an early version of the introduction and chapter 1. He gave me three pieces of advice which became basic principles in the writing and rewriting of the rest of the book.

I'd like especially to thank Ross McKerras for his ready availability to help with Greek language and translation issues.

I also need to acknowledge my home congregation at St. Timothy's church in Burnside, Christchurch, where I have had the privilege of preaching regularly over the years. Books are not written by solitary people in a book-lined room. They spring out of the life of a community, and in particular out of the word of God that comes as a preacher prepares and a congregation expectant reach out their hands and hearts for it. Many of the truths and illustrations that have found their way into the book originally had their source in preaching.

Introduction

Teletype across the bottom of the screen: Jerusalem, AD 56, garrison commander's office, the Fortress of Antonia. The boy is eleven or twelve, with tousled hair and the cheerful boldness of a tomboy: there are dozens like him in the teeming streets and alleys of the city. He is not homeless: the sleeve of his tunic has been torn not long ago, the tribune notices, and mended with careful stitches. A little overawed by being here in the heart of the Antonia, with the armed sentry behind him and the hubbub of a working garrison all around, nonetheless he answers readily enough, and tells what he has overheard. The request that will come from the Jewish Council for a second examination of the defendant. The forty men preparing to ambush the guard party. The vow not to eat or to drink before the prisoner is dead.

The tribune doesn't hesitate. He knows the fundamentalist politics of the place, and the way these things work. The orders are given swiftly. Shortly after dark a massively armed squadron heads out of the city gate and down the main road to the coast. Two hundred foot soldiers, two hundred spearmen, seventy horsemen, all escorting a single prisoner. The bird has flown. Still in chains, Paul of Tarsus has left Jerusalem, and is headed for the safety of Caesarea Philippi.

Teletype chatter once more: Two months previously, the port of Miletus, just south of Ephesus, an hour after sunrise. A steady breeze from the land carries the cry of gulls, the smells of wood smoke, straw and dung, and the aroma of food cooking in hundreds of courtyards. Under the feet of a stream of laden slaves the gangplank creaks and bucks as the cargo is packed into the hold. The captain watches the shadows shortening on the quayside: the high tide is only a couple of hours away, and nowadays both breeze and tide are necessary to negotiate the harbor entrance. He is impatient to be gone.

At the base of the quay the passengers are talking with a group of a dozen or more local people who have come to bid them farewell. Several are older men, but there is a mix of ages. Two are women. It is no casual parting. While they are too far off for him to hear what is being said, the earnestness of what is going on is clear. The leader of the traveling group is the focus: a short man, solidly built, salt and pepper hair, a keen glance under black eyebrows. The captain watches as one by one each of the group grasps his hand and speaks, sometimes with great emotion. Several kiss him

on each cheek, as is the custom of those from the western lands. There are tears and cries, and not only from the women. Then suddenly, right there on the stone quayside, the whole group kneels. Out in the open air, far from any temple, clearly they are praying to their god. A final handshake and it is over. The larger group stands back as the traveling party, two of them with the heavy canvas shoulder bags that never leave their sight, head towards the gangplank. They are ready to sail.[1]

Set so closely together in time, these two incidents illustrate the very different responses of the people of his day to the man who wrote the letter to the Romans. The irony of the attempt upon his life (only the latest of a string of such incidents) would not have been lost upon Paul himself. In a former life he too had been that kind of passionate fanatic, convinced that the Christian message was so dangerous to God's revealed truth that those infected with it had to be rooted out and destroyed.[2] As we approach Paul's letter to the Romans, we need to be aware that this is what we are getting: it contains a message that is capable of engendering this kind of reaction. From such a man it would be foolish to expect a soothing sermon of self-congratulation, pious platitudes reinforcing us in what we already know. And indeed it is an incendiary document, designed to challenge the smallness of our vision of God, and to bring us face to face with him in a way that may well be deeply threatening. Are we prepared for this?

The moving farewell by the elders of the church at Ephesus, who had walked the nighttime roads from the city to the port to bid Paul farewell for the last time, shows us the other side of the coin: the deep love and appreciation that people all across the Mediterranean held for the apostle to the nations. They weren't just in love with his ideas, they were warmly attached to the man himself. We catch echoes of this everywhere in the correspondence. In letters to churches like those at Philippi and Corinth, and to individuals like Timothy and Philemon, the warmth of personal appreciation shines out, and this is so even when there are tough issues to deal with. Writing to the Galatian churches Paul reminds them of how when he came to them in a time of need and great bodily weakness they welcomed him "as an angel of God," indeed "as if he were Messiah Jesus himself." They would, he reminds them, have torn out their own eyes and given them to him, if they thought it would have helped.[3] In the Romans letter, too, we see the human qualities of Paul the man: his willingness and honesty in sharing his own personal experience; the earnest pastoral concern that informs everything he says; his pain and grief over the unbelief of his own people, Israel.

CHANGING HISTORY

But it is not for its human dimension alone that the letter to the Romans has been prized by the church down the years since Paul first dictated it. The power of the writing, the depth and the glory of its proclamation of the way God has acted in the world, the earnestness and urgency of its teaching about what it means to live a fully human

life, all these have burnt its message into the experience of countless Christians. The letter should have a warning label on it. It has seized upon individuals and upon whole communities over the years, changing them, and in some cases utterly transforming their world. *Martin Luther*, for example, tormented by moral failure and anxiety about his situation before God, found here the secret of peace and freedom—and the theological dynamite of his discovery transformed not only individual lives in his own day, but the political and religious future of a continent. Two hundred years later *John Wesley* heard the Preface to Luther's lectures on Romans read aloud in a small study group. He "felt his heart strangely warmed,"[4] as he later wrote, and it burst upon him that indeed Christ had died for *him*. His life was transformed. Wesley's subsequent preaching ministry, covering 250,000 miles on horseback all over England, introduced many thousands of people to Christ as not just a distant religious figure, but one who could change lives today. The impact of his ministry upon the social life of his time was arguably one of the reasons why England did not suffer a violent revolution in the eighteenth century as had happened in France. Finally, in the early twentieth century the publication of *Karl Barth*'s commentary on this letter was spoken of by one reviewer as "a bombshell dropped on the theologian's playground."[5] Barth himself described it as more like going into a country church in the middle of the night and, stumbling in the dark, grasping hold of the bell rope, bringing all the community running to see what had happened.[6]

These are the stars, of course—very able people whose discovery of Romans has had wide public influence. But, unnoticed by the history books, there are literally millions of people who have found in this letter a deep source of life and hope. I remember reading about a young minister in the nineteenth century who, visiting a miner's house one evening, discovered him reading Romans. Visiting again a month later, he was surprised to find the man still absorbed in the same letter. When he mentioned this, the burly miner looked at him slowly over his spectacles. "Son," he said, "I'm putting a shaft down here."

Yet it has to be acknowledged that Romans is not as easy reading as the Gospels, for example, or the Old Testament history books. We can't just pick it up and grasp all of it all at once, like we might do with the newspaper. Many people will remember reading Shakespeare in school, and having to struggle with the language and unfamiliar concepts in order to break through to the power and excitement of those amazing plays. Shakespeare wrote in English around 400 years ago. But Paul's letter was written in Greek and almost *2,000* years ago. A good modern translation helps a huge amount with the language, of course, but there are still words and ideas in Romans that don't leap off the page. We have to unpack their meaning; we have to take the time to think ourselves into Paul's world a little. As we do that, though, the letter starts to stir under our hand and become a living thing: we hear again the earnest voice of the apostle as with passion and with urgency he uses every technique that he knows to convey the power and the glory of what he has seen in the gospel.

SPOKEN, NOT WRITTEN

One important thing to understand right from the beginning is that Paul did not actually *write* the letter. If we thought about the writing process we might imagine him like some medieval philosopher in an upper room late at night, dipping his quill in the ink, pausing every now and again to think, and then bending once again over the parchment. Not true! In Paul's day only specialists actually wrote anything more than a sentence or two. Paul, like every other educated person, dictated his letters to a scribe. The scribe was the word processor of the time: they were how you wrote things.[7] We know who the scribe was for the letter to the Romans: his name was Tertius, and right at the end of the letter he adds his own personal greeting to the church at Rome (16:22). So, instead of imagining Paul sitting down and writing the letter himself, we have instead to think of him restlessly walking up and down the room, dictating to a scribe. Sometimes the words would come tumbling out, and Tertius would be struggling to keep up. At other times Paul might say "Run that past me again . . . " Tertius would do so, and Paul would then take up his argument at the point he had left off.

The reason it is important to understand this is because it suggests that our aim in working with Romans should be less to *read* the letter than to *hear* it. While he did send letters from time to time, Paul's main calling was as a preacher and teacher. After regular preaching tours across the known world for more than two decades he is superbly skilled at engaging and involving an audience. He is a skilled orator. During all this time he has longed to visit Rome, so far without success (1:9–15). Hence, the letter. As he dictates we have to think of him with the Roman congregation vivid in his imagination as he preaches to them as he has preached to so many audiences over the years. Only in this case, the sermon is written down by a scribe.

Like any good sermon, Paul's letter grabs us by the scruff of the neck and refuses to let us go. There are real surprises: he knows how to play his audience, to lead us along with him all unwittingly until suddenly he turns the argument on its head, and we find ourselves confronted with uncomfortable truths and with the living God. What he says is intensely practical. Paul had no time for a theology that didn't day by day and moment by moment engage with the life-experience of real people. And it is deeply personal. Paul doesn't preach from some elevated place but is completely honest about his own struggles and conflicting emotions. He doesn't talk *at* us, but draws us *with* him on a journey into the truth of God that involves him just as completely as it does us. It is a journey that leads to some astonishing and deeply joyful places.

Which brings us to the final thing we need to say about the letter in this introduction. Provided we give it the respectful attention that is necessary to enter into its world, we will soon enough find that *that world is also in fact our own*, right now in the twenty-first century.[8] One reason for that is because no matter where we find ourselves in history, the pressing issues of human life remain the same. Both joys and challenges, they are fundamental to what it means to be human. But the second reason

is even more significant. Paul's letter is about us only because in the first instance it is about *God*. In that sense, this 2,000-year-old letter is more contemporary than this morning's newspaper. Because through it we find ourselves, right now, directly and personally addressed by the living God. As we read the letter we step into his eternal present. We find ourselves face to face with him.

What lies before us then is not just the task of working out what worthy things there might be to learn from a famous old Christian letter. For this is Scripture. Luther, Wesley, and Barth didn't find Romans so powerful because they were smart or specially gifted people. They are famous because they were those things also, but that was not the source of the power. What each of them testified was that the letter itself gripped them; that it was not what they brought to the letter but God himself speaking through these words into their world that made the difference. The same will be so for us. What we are doing is a bit like working through a pile of papers on a desk, or sorting out and folding away laundry tumbled on a bed. Underneath the pile we find our missing mobile phone. We pick up the phone—and it rings.

WARNING STICKER

The letter itself may not have a warning sticker on it, but perhaps the book you are holding should have at least a small one. If you decide to come on this journey you need to know that you will find yourself, as I have done, in unexpected and surprising places. Before we can get to grips with the meaning of the letter, we will, for example, have to do some careful work in establishing what Paul actually wrote. Even in the very first sections we are going to discover that some of our Bible translations use words that reflect what the translators know Paul *ought* to be saying, rather than what is actually there in the text. Chapter divisions are another problem. In several places (Romans is particularly bad for this) the way the material is broken up into the traditional chapters confuses rather than clarifies Paul's meaning.[9] While we will be reading steadily through the letter, instead of reading each verse in a mechanical sequence like beads on a string we will be trying always to understand the way the argument of each section unfolds as a whole. All along the way things that for some of us have long been familiar will appear in a startling new light.

It is when we do come to understand what Paul is actually saying, however, that the real challenges arise. What has struck me again and again in working through the letter is how shocking, how outrageous, Paul's message must have appeared in his day to all right-thinking religious people. It was not for nothing that zealous and committed men devised the plot to kill Paul that we spoke of in the opening paragraph: it was crucial for the purity and the integrity of the faith that he be silenced. We need to keep this in mind as we read. We don't hear much of this Paul, the uncomfortable Paul, the dangerous Paul, in the current way we read his letters. We have domesticated his Roman letter and have claimed Paul himself as one of our own. His confrontational

message goes right past us; it is directed to someone else, to some other religious person in some other time. But if we are to be honest before God, we cannot fool ourselves like this. Paul's message challenges us right at the heart of our self-understanding as Christians. God looks us in the eye. And it is on this basis alone that we are, perhaps for the first time, able to hear his message of salvation and deliverance.

Are you on for this? The letter to the Romans is not for the faint-hearted. But what we are looking for is not safety and comfort but the word of the Living God; a word which, uncomfortable as it may be at times, is nonetheless a stream of living water in a desert land. Where else can we go? How could we be satisfied with anything less? It is my prayer that through this book, or alongside it—or even perhaps despite it—God himself may speak to us; that Paul's letter to the Romans may fall open to us, and that through it the glory and grace of God that first gripped Paul himself would shine, to the refreshment of our lives, and the transformation of our world.

THE KIND OF BOOK THIS IS

This is not a book for scholars, but for ordinary thoughtful Christians. Paul didn't write for learned people, nor was his letter designed to sit on a library shelf. Like Paul himself I have tried to write a kind of a page-turner; something designed to be read, rather than referred to. You will therefore need to start at the start. Readers flicking through to find out what is said about particular passages will be crucially handicapped by not having the context of what has gone before.

I also (wistfully perhaps) hope that the scholars might also take the time to have a look, even if they have to stoop a little to come in through the doorway of a popular exposition. Again and again what Paul is actually saying in Romans seems to me different from the understanding of the letter that is taken for granted in the literature. In Hillary Mantel's novel of sixteenth-century England, *Wolf Hall* (HarperCollins, 2009), Thomas Cromwell offers his wife a copy of the newly translated (and at that time, contraband) New Testament in English. "Read it," he suggests, and referring to the doctrines of purgatory and priesthood and indulgences and the church structure of that time, "You'll be surprised at what you don't find." That is how it is with Romans. It is surprising what after a close reading of the text you don't find—and completely extraordinary what you do.

My special hope is that this book will filter through to the pastors and the preachers, those whose responsibility is week by week to stand in pulpits and communicate the glory of the good news to their people, yet whose academic training has taught them that Romans is a tough theological book which can only be preached selectively and with caution. It is time that impression was replaced with a different truth. "Unbind him and let him go." It is time that Paul's letter was liberated again to do its work, God's transforming work, in the world.

A NEW TRANSLATION

Although I have at every point consulted the standard English versions, the translation provided here is my own. I should note just a couple of things about that. Translating a text from one language to another, and especially translating something written long ago, can never be a word-for-word business. The *more literal* and word-for-word a translation is the *less accurate* it will be. But there are tight constraints upon the process. Paul was a precise and careful communicator, and dealing with matters of the greatest importance; a cheerful but inexact paraphrase won't do the job. The translation offered here is therefore based on two principles: (1) *Freedom in expression* insofar as that is necessary to communicate what Paul is saying in language that is natural and meaningful to a modern audience without a background of church talk. I haven't hesitated to fill out phrases, to re-order, or to rephrase in order to make clear comprehensible English sentences. The aim throughout is faithfulness not to the individual words, but to the meaning that they express. (2) *Extremely careful concern for accuracy of meaning,* especially in situations where the English translational tradition makes assumptions, or silently interprets the text in the light of what it was later believed to contain. I realize that this will sound alarming to some and presumptuous to others. For those with Greek language skills I can only point to the text itself (please check this end-note.[10]) For all of the rest of us, you will have to trust me. But my hope is that as we go along the text will start to validate itself, and that as we read and think about it we will gain increasing confidence that this really is what Paul was saying. It will hang together and make sense; things that up to now have seemed opaque and merely religious will become understandable in terms of real life outside of Christian culture. I won't get it right every time, of course. For the mistakes and misunderstandings that will undoubtedly crop up I can only seek your pardon, and Paul's.

A NOTE ABOUT NOTES

The notes at the end of the book (indicated by the superscript numbers in the text) provide another layer of engagement with the text for those who want to dig deeper. While the main text is written for the majority of us, those readers who already know Romans well will want more detail about why I take unfamiliar positions about certain key passages; the notes to the translation are there for them. Other notes give more information about first century religious and cultural matters; others extend the theological thinking or the practical outworking of what Paul is saying in a way that would break up the main line of the text if it was included there. Don't be put off by the notes! Treat them like a click-through link on a website. I suggest boldly ignoring them on a first reading. Some people, though, will want to keep a bookmark in the notes section to check them out as they go along, and that is cool too.

ROMANS UNPLUGGED

Not every reader will be familiar with the expression "unplugged." Modern musical performances and recordings are heavily technically augmented, by electronic instruments, amplifiers, and speakers, controlled from behind the scenes from a sound mixing desk where the input from the various microphones is balanced and adjusted. To play "unplugged" means that the artist or band puts aside all these artificial aids, and plays directly upon acoustic instruments with no electronic enhancements.

This is a metaphor for what I am trying to do with Paul's letter in this book. Romans has been a key Christian source-document ever since it was written, and rightly so. But that means that it comes to us today so overlaid with all those years of amplification and mixing, theologizing and system-making that it is often impossible to hear what it is saying anymore. What I am trying to do here is to gently unplug for a while from all of that later thinking, and allow Paul alone to stand up there on stage and sing us the song he sang at the beginning. Whether I am successful in that you will have to decide as we go along. There will certainly be surprises. But underneath the ideas and the arguments I hope that we will with increasingly clarity come to hear Paul's living voice: achingly personal, intensely practical, always both challenging and encouraging, pointing us to God. Let us listen to the man.

Endnotes

1. These two stories can be found in Acts 23:16–24 and 20:13–38.
2. The threefold repetition of the story of his own conversion in the public interrogations recorded in Acts reflects his awareness of this—and his desire that others too might experience a similar encounter and transformation.
3. Gal 4:12–15.
4. *John Wesley's Journal* from the entry for May 24, 1738.
5. Quoted by F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (Inter-Varsity Press: Leicester, 1983), 60.
6. After completing this introduction I discovered that F. F. Bruce uses the same three illustrations (plus others) in the introduction to his Tyndale commentary on Romans (IVP, revised edition 1985, p. 56.)
7. It was also how you *read* them. Reading one's own letter was much less efficient than giving it to a professional reader/writer to read for you. And reading always involved *speaking out the words*; communication was always a matter of the living voice. In an oral society a letter or a book was treated as we would treat a script or a score: as something to perform. Texts posed a challenge in an only partly literate society, and competent readers were not everywhere to be found. *Silent* reading was still an astonishment and a curiosity well into the Middle Ages. This is, therefore, a fundamental difference between our time and Paul's. For us writing is often the first thing: even sermons and speeches are usually written first, before being spoken. It is initially a silent process. But in the first century *speech* was the primary form. Writing was secondary; it was merely a way of recording speeches for the benefit of those who couldn't attend, or of communicating when you couldn't speak face to face. This is what Paul tells us *Romans* is: a temporary substitute for his personal presence (1:8–15). When it arrived, the letter was not read individually by members of the Roman congregation. Originally there was only one copy; and few people read things as part of their everyday life anyway. The letter was read *to* them, and that was done in the first place by the *letter-carrier*, who was the writer's representative in delivering the letter. There was, of course, no postal service! The letter-carrier was not merely a messenger, but an associate; someone who knew the writer's thinking, and who therefore could read the letter to the recipient or recipients with understanding. In the case of Romans, a number of scholars suggest that the letter-carrier was the Phoebe whom Paul mentions in 16:1. As a respected member of the church in Cenchrae and someone who knew Paul well, she may well have been the kind of person who would have been entrusted with this task. We have no firm evidence. If that was in fact the case, however, it would say a great deal about the openness of the Roman church to such a ministry from a woman in what was still a strongly male-dominated society, and about the power of the Christian gospel to bring that about.
8. Karl Barth describes this process in the work of John Calvin: "How energetically Calvin, having first established what stands in the text, sets himself to re-think the whole material and to wrestle with it, till the walls which separate the sixteenth century from the first become transparent! Paul

speaks, and the man of the sixteenth century hears. The conversation between the original record and the reader moves around the subject-matter, until a distinction between yesterday and today becomes impossible." (Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, 7.)

9. Although various ways of finding one's way around the text were in use from the fourth century AD, the chapter divisions in our modern Bibles date from the early thirteenth century.

10. Individual translational decisions are defended in the endnote to each text section. On two occasions the differences between the meaning conveyed by the traditional English versions and the meaning of the Greek text are so significant as to damage our understanding of what Paul is saying in the whole of the letter. On these occasions the explanation of the translation I offer is brought into the main text as an optional text box.

1

Romans 1: 1–7

Paul's Self-Introduction

"This letter comes from Paul, slave of Messiah Jesus and a called messenger, set apart for the good news of God. [2] *Promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures,* [3] *that news concerns his Son, who with regard to his physical descent came of David's line, and* [4] *with regard to his holy spirit was declared to be Son of God with power by resurrection from the dead. Through him, Jesus, the Jews' Messiah and the Christians' Lord,* [5] *we have received both the privilege and the commission to bring about the obedience of faith among all the nations, so that his name may be spread far and wide.*

[6] *And that includes yourselves, called as you are by Jesus Messiah.* [7] *To all God's beloved in Rome, then, called and holy: grace to you and peace from God our Father and [the] Lord Jesus Messiah."*[1]

Christ or Messiah?

What does the word "Christ" mean to you? We use it all the time, but mostly it just functions as a sort of name of honor to refer to Jesus. We don't think of it as having a meaning. But it does . . .

The English word is just a transliteration of *Christos*, the word used by those who first translated the Old Testament into Greek for the Hebrew word "anointed one," i.e., the Messiah, God's promised future king of Israel and the nations. That translation wasn't a particularly useful one, because anointing wasn't part of royal ritual in the Greek and Roman world; besides, the Greek word *christos* meant being smeared with oil or fat: it had more of an unpleasant than a pleasant connotation. Mostly it was taken to be merely

a name, passing into Latin for example as "Chrestus." For most of Christian history we too have used "Christ" in much the same way as we would a surname. But *Christos* is not a name. Nor strictly is it a title. It is a *description,* a description of someone sent by God for a particular task, and anointed with oil as a sign both of his authority and his destiny.

The word is central to the message of the New Testament. There was much debate during Jesus' lifetime as to whether he was or was not the promised Messiah. For the religious leaders of the day the death of Jesus proved conclusively that he was not (Mark 15:32, Luke 23:35). But the resurrection changed everything. Peter declared it at Pentecost: "Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made this Jesus whom you crucified *both Lord and Messiah*" (Acts 2:36). John announced it as the whole purpose of his gospel: "These things are written that you may come to believe that Jesus is *the Messiah, the Son of God*, and that believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31). The question had changed. No longer was it whether Jesus matched the Old Testament picture of the promised Messiah. Now it was realized that the person of the risen Jesus in his authority and power *defined what the word Messiah had always meant.*

Understanding all this, Paul never uses the word casually. Even when he is speaking in general of "Jesus Christ" (rather than "Jesus the Christ") or of friends in the congregation in Rome as fellow-workers "in Christ," the article "the" is always implicit. Often the meaning of the word is central to his thought: as in this verse, where the description "Messiah" is placed for emphasis before the personal name and foreshadows the identification of Jesus as the Son of God, ruler of the nations (v. 4). And in some sections of the letter (e.g. 3:21–25, 5:6–11 and 8:11) the significance of the word as a descriptive title is completely crucial for understanding what Paul is getting at.

All of this poses a problem for a translator. Because *Messiah* still has meaning in twenty-first-century English, I have chosen to use that original word instead of *Christos,* its Greek translation. We all have some idea about what a Messiah might be, but, unless I am mistaken, little or no idea of what a Christ might be. Even if this feels unfamiliar at first, it will help us understand passages in the letter that will otherwise be puzzling; perhaps too it will help us to rediscover the meaning of the word "Christ" wherever we encounter it in other contexts.

This is Paul's *letterhead*. It explains who the writer is and his authority for writing, it says who the letter is addressed to, and it tells us what it is about. I have a similar letter sitting on my desk as I write. The letterhead says "Tower Insurance," it is addressed to Mr. and Mrs. Brighton, and it tells us that our premiums are going up. Sigh!

Of course no one spends a lot of time gazing at the letterhead of a business letter: we quickly read on to see what the letter itself says. But before we move on from these introductory verses we need to notice three of their extraordinary features.

Firstly, Paul's message is *news*. Christianity is not based on philosophy or theology or general principles such as a scientist might assemble to create a theory. It is

nothing human beings could deduce or discover. It is about an *event in history*, an *act of God in the world*, something that breaks in from outside to change things.

Secondly, that act is not a mere happening, it is a *person*: God's Son, the Messiah, prophesied in the Old Testament and now in Paul's lifetime stepping into history. On one level, Paul is saying, Jesus was a man, with a human genealogy like any other person. But the resurrection changes everything we might otherwise have thought about him: it proclaims that he is the Son of God.

When I was younger, verse 4 used to really bother me. Was Paul saying that Jesus was declared to be Son of God only at the resurrection? Doesn't the start of John's Gospel and other passages tell us that he has always been with God and really God from the very beginning? Is there some uncertainty about that?

The key that unlocks the puzzle may sound a little strange at first, and it is this: the title Son of God is in its origin not a *divine* but a *human* title. In the Old Testament it was especially the title of the king: he was God's representative in ruling the nation. He embodied and symbolized God's sovereignty over the people. Psalm 2 expresses the idea especially vividly. God addresses the newly crowned king, and declares

> You are my Son; today I have begotten you.
> Ask me and I will make the nations your inheritance,
> and the ends of the earth your possession.
> You shall break them with an iron rod,
> and smash them to bits like a piece of crockery.[2]

This is the Son of God that Paul is speaking about in verse 4. As to his human pedigree Jesus is the Messiah, the heir of David's promises, the ruler of *the nation* of Israel.[3] But the stunning fact of the resurrection declares something much deeper. Because of who he is, because of the unique spirit he possesses, Jesus has been appointed as the Son of God, the ruler of *the nations*.[4]

And he is that not just in the hopeful and rather militant way that the writer of Psalm 2 envisaged. What Paul is describing is not a merely human "Son of God" but *God's* Son (v. 3): a real human being, yet also, in a way Paul cannot define but is forced to recognize, God himself entering human history and making it his own.[5] To use terminology developed long after his time, the word "Son" for Paul means something like *God incarnate.* Jesus is the reality of which the earlier royal language only hinted. God himself has come.

The blessing at the end of verse 7, therefore, doesn't refer to two persons, but to one. Paul knows that Jesus was a real human being who ate and drank and got tired and laughed and wept as we all do. Nonetheless, he wishes grace and peace to his readers "from God our Father and [the] Lord Jesus Messiah." I have placed the article in square brackets, because it isn't there in the Greek text. One could just as correctly punctuate the sentence "from God, *our Father and Lord Jesus Messiah.*"[6]

Finally, notice how Paul honors his listeners. They aren't random individuals trying their best to make a life in the world, they are *loved by God*. Like him, they too have been called by Messiah Jesus; their lives like his have been irrevocably changed by encounter with the holy. Despite the uniqueness of his own commission, he writes to them as his equals: as mature people able to choose and to change, as fellow-participants in a great adventure.

And we too are encountered here. This is not just a letter addressed to other people, far away and long ago. Of course Paul had no idea that his words would be read by people like us two thousand years later. But then, he hadn't met the Roman Christians to whom he was writing, either. Whatever our location in space and time there is no question that we are the people to whom Paul is writing: people loved by God, called into life by the risen Jesus; people who don't understand everything but nonetheless are already being changed by an encounter that we have not initiated. And people eager to go on: eager to learn more about this God, eager to discover in our practical experience what the life is that he calls us into.