

“Our Lord”

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Jesus is sovereign over everything, everywhere, from the Big Bang to the Big Crunch.

Romans 10:4-15

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(Corinth sermons are available in audio and print forms at corinthtoday.org/sermons.)

The sovereign

From now through Easter we are considering the second paragraph of the Apostles' Creed, which is all about the second person of the Trinity. Last week we pondered Jesus as “The Incomparable One.” All who believe in him have the right to be called children of God, but Jesus is the “only begotten” of the Father. This phrase means “one and only,” “unique” in its absolute sense. He is the Christ, the anointed one, the only one designated by God to transform the world. He is known to us by the name Jesus. Jesus means Rescuer, but it's also his common name, like “Bob.”

Today we ask what it means to confess, “I believe... in Jesus Christ (God's) only begotten Son *our Lord*.” In 21st century America, our concept of anything remotely resembling lordship is distasteful. The only time we're likely to use the word “lord” is as a verb, and it's not a positive association. To “lord it over” someone is negative.

So what do we substitute? Boss? Coach? Teacher? Pastor? Spouse? President? Military commander? Police officer? Mentor? There may be parallels to lordship in each, but they are temporary or limited. In 21st century America, who really has unquestioned authority, 24/7, over your whole life? Nobody.

About midweek I settled on the word “sovereign” as the best parallel to “Lord.” It seems to be a largely unspoiled word, referring to absolute authority, autonomy, and control. We don't refer to our American politicians as “sovereign,” for the same reason we don't call them “lord.” For the political parallel we have to cross the ocean to our mother country, Great Britain. But we know the word, and know it positively.

Recently Linda and I have enjoyed the Masterpiece Theater series about the longest serving sovereigns in British history, both ironically women: Queen Elizabeth (still on the throne) and Queen Victoria from the nineteenth century. At the time of her birth, Victoria was fifth in line to the British throne. When her father and then three uncles died without male progeny, Victoria became queen at the age of 18. We know so much about her not only from British history but from her exhaustive personal diaries.

While there are certainly flaws in the comparison, it's possible that the British "sovereign" is helpful in explaining what it means that Jesus Christ is "our Lord." I admit that I'm somewhat influenced by Masterpiece's Victoria. The parallels include –

- *Allegiance*: Politicians and citizens swear an oath of absolute loyalty.
- *Mystery*: Much that transpires behind the scenes is veiled to the public.
- *Restraint*: The sovereign does not openly micromanage details.
- *Love*: Victoria especially longed for her people to know that she loved them even when they did not understand her.

Let's test "sovereign" as a synonym for "Lord" in Romans 10.

Heart and mouth (vv. 9-10)

The most familiar part of this passage is Romans 10:9-10. Every one of my 500 Confirmands since I came to Corinth has been required to memorize at least verse 9: "That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."

I ask my Confirmands if they know they belong to Jesus. They usually answer, "Yes." "How do you know?" I ask. "Because Jesus died for my sins."

"That's true," I might say, "but who is Jesus?" It's not important that he died, not even that he died on a cross, unless you first understand who he is. That's why Paul begins, "Jesus is Lord." If he's not Lord, his was just another tragic and unjust death.

Perhaps because I stress the importance of Jesus' death to "close the gap," I often find in their essay that they leave out the resurrection. "You left him dead," I might say. If God didn't raise Jesus from the dead, he isn't Lord.

So it's all quite simple, right? You confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, and you will be saved.

When I think deeper and harder, I still have some questions. What exactly am I confessing when I declare that "Jesus is Lord"? I've heard it said all my life that if he's not Lord of all, he's not Lord at all. But who here wants to say openly that Jesus is 100% sovereign over every detail of your life? If someone is consciously harboring one or more places where you're having a hard time letting Jesus be in charge – as in, you're

worrying too much or you're having a hard time forgiving someone or you're being possessive with your money or you aren't working for more justice or your lust is not under control – then are you not truly “saved”? Is this about Jesus being *your* Lord?

Also, why does Paul make it so critical to “confess with your mouth”? How important is that, really? Let's go right to the extreme examples. If you live in North Korea or certain parts of Pakistan or India, can you be a secret believer? Or is that an oxymoron? Are you really not saved if you meet in underground churches to protect your family, your home, your job, your life?

Law and faith

We need context in order to dig deeper into what Paul is saying. The Apostle Paul wrote this letter to Rome before he ever visited the city. He knows that Rome, being a cosmopolitan city, includes people of all backgrounds, including Jews and Gentiles. This letter, then, presents a universal Gospel. God does not show favoritism, Paul insists in chapter 2. In chapter 3 he adds, “There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” (3:22-24).

By the time he comes to chapter 9, however, Paul knows he needs to explain something. In the Old Testament, the same Bible Paul read, the same Bible both Jewish and Gentile Christians in Rome read, it sure seems like God *does* play favorites! He chooses the Jews and works through them. If there's no difference, Paul needs to address the past, present, and future of the Jewish people after Jesus came.

Chapter 10 opens with Paul repeating his earnest desire that *Israelites* may be saved. This is important. While verses 9-10 certainly have application to us Gentiles, they were written for and about Jews. Don't forget that.

Seven times in our reading today Paul quotes the Old Testament. He's making a *biblical* argument for Jews to accept who Jesus is and what he did. The first Old Testament quotation is in verse 5, and it's from Leviticus 18:5 – “The person who does these things will live by them.” What “things”? What Leviticus demands, which is a detailed code for holiness along with requirements for sacrifices and festivals. It's much more than the Ten Commandments. This is the way to “live.”

That's a problem, right? Nobody can keep all those rules. Paul's already made that abundantly clear in his early chapters. Is he now saying that he agrees with Moses that the way to life is by keeping the law? Yes and no. Yes, because what Moses says is true. If you were able theoretically to keep God's law perfectly, you could have eternal life. No, because he's setting you up for something else.

Verse 4 is critical for context: “Christ is the culmination of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.” The word “culmination” (*telos*)

means either “end” or “goal.” I would argue for the latter. Jesus didn’t end the law, but he did accomplish its goal. He perfectly fulfilled the law. He’s the only one who ever did. You and I never will. What Paul seems to be saying is that there is a righteousness possible through the law, but you have to be as good as Jesus. That rules me out. You?

Is there another way (remember, he’s talking to and about the Jewish people) to “life” that the Old Testament anticipates? To answer this, Paul offers three quotes from Deuteronomy 30, one of Moses’ last speeches before he dies. In Deuteronomy 30, Moses promises prosperity to the people if they follow the law of God. That sounds at first like a repeat of Leviticus: keep the law and you will live.

Then Moses adds a paragraph that Paul reads as pointing to Christ. Moses says, in effect, “Don’t overcomplicate it.” Here’s the whole paragraph –

Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, “Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?” Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, “Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?” No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.

Paul says in Romans 10:6-8, “Aha! There it is!” Trying to keep all those rules can feel overwhelming, discouraging, terrifying. But it’s closer than you think. Paul takes those ideas and applies them to Jesus. You don’t have to go looking for Christ in heaven to bring him down to earth. He’s already come! You don’t have to go searching below to bring Christ back from the dead. He’s already alive! What does Moses say? “The word (remember how John used “word” last week as a universal communication) is near you.” Where is it? In your mouth and in your heart.

That leads him to verse 9: “Confess with your *mouth* that ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your *heart* that God raised him from the dead.” Now that we know Paul’s primary message is directed to and about the Jews, we understand what he means that Jesus is Lord. You’ve probably heard that Paul is contrasting “Jesus is Lord” with “Caesar is Lord” If this confession were somewhere else in the New Testament or even somewhere else in Romans that might be the meaning. Here it’s directed to the Jews.

Who is “Lord” to the Jews? About two hundred years before the time of Christ, the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek in Alexandria, Egypt. This same Greek word Paul uses for “Lord” in Romans 10:9 (*kurios*), is used 6000 times in the Greek Old Testament to translate the holy name of God, Yahweh (or Jehovah) – *LORD* in most English Bibles. Paul is saying you must confess with your mouth that Jesus is Yahweh.

Jesus is the One who formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life (Genesis 2:7). Jesus is the One whom Abram believed and God credited it to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:6). Jesus is the One who said to

Moses, “I am who I am” (Exodus 3:14). Jesus is the One of whom Joshua said, “As for me and my household, we will serve the LORD” (Joshua 2:15). Jesus is the One of whom David said, “The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want” (Psalm 23:1). Jesus is the One Isaiah saw high and lifted up, as angels cried, “Holy, holy, holy is Yahweh Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory” (Isaiah 6:3).

Jesus, who was conceived in the virgin Mary’s womb, born in a Bethlehem stable, grew up in a carpenter’s shop, healed the sick, raised the dead, preached the Sermon on the Mount, confronted scribes, Pharisees, and priests, ate with prostitutes and tax collectors, was hailed as the Son of David when he rode a donkey into Jerusalem, ate the Passover with his disciples in the Upper Room, prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, suffered under Pontius Pilate, cried out on the cross “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”, breathed his last, was placed in a borrowed tomb, rose again to life the third day, commissioned his followers to make disciples of all nations, ascended to his Father, and will come again to judge the living and the dead – yes, *that* Jesus – is one with and equal to Yahweh who saturates every page of the Jewish Bible.

We trivialize this confession when we frame it as an issue of whether you have “made Jesus Lord.” Nobody in England asks, “Have you made Elizabeth your queen?” She is sovereign whether or not you acknowledge her as such.

Paul doesn’t say, “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is my Lord.’” Jesus is Yahweh, whether he’s *your* Lord or not. Every knee will bow and every tongue will confess who he is. You’re not *making* him Lord when you say certain words. You are declaring who he is in himself. He is the absolute sovereign. This passage is not about you. It’s about Jesus. He is Lord. You don’t diminish him if you deny him, and your confession doesn’t enhance his identity. Jesus is Lord, period.

Evangelism and missions

From there Paul continues with three quotes from the Prophets. “*Anyone* who believes in him will never be put to shame” (v. 11, from Isaiah 28:16, emphasis added). “*Everyone* who calls on the name of the Lord (Jesus!) will be saved” (v. 13, from Joel 2:32, emphasis added). In other words, “There is no difference” (v. 12).

“How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news” (v. 15, from Isaiah 52:7). All people need this news – Jew, Gentile, poor, rich, men, women, slave, free. How will they call if they don’t believe? How will they believe if they don’t hear? How will they hear if your feet are not beautiful?

Get this word out... in Hickory, in North Carolina, across the United States, around the world. God has limited himself to partnership with us! We cannot ever stop finding ways to tell this good news. Love lavishly. Serve selflessly. Tell boldly to Jew, Gentile, old, young, immigrant, citizen. How will they believe if you do not tell?

It's personal

It turns out that sovereign is a great word for Jesus, as long you're thinking not of a sovereign over something as small as a country or an empire, but the Sovereign of the universe. Sovereign in its strictest, most literal sense, means absolute rule, total control, unhindered autonomy. Jesus, fully God and fully human, is sovereign over everything and everyone, from the Big Bang to the Big Crunch.

He is *the* Lord. In the Apostles' Creed we confess him as *our* Lord. We're not being possessive over him, as if to say he's only Lord of our hemisphere or our church. We're saying rather that *we* are among those who have come to believe in him as *the* Lord of all, *the* sovereign over all things. When we do declare that he is Lord, and believe that God raised him from the dead, we don't enhance him – but the confession changes everything for us. Our identity changes, our priorities change, our desires begin to shift toward what matters to him. And we gain a marvelous assurance of life.

Pastor Paul shared with me early in the week a beautiful story about Queen Victoria's connection to Romans 10:9-10. At first I thought it could have been one of those "preacher's stories," legends that may have a kernel of truth but are enlarged and passed on from preacher to preacher and told as truth. This one is true, emerging from Queen Victoria's private journals.

The queen had attended worship in St. Paul's Cathedral, and afterward asked her Chaplain, "Can one be absolutely sure in this life of eternal safety?" He said he didn't think so. The conversation was overheard, and the "Court News" circulated the dialogue throughout Britain. An evangelist named John Townsend wrote to the Queen:

To her Gracious Majesty, our beloved Queen Victoria, from one of her most humble subjects: With trembling hands, but heartfelt love, and because I know that we can be absolutely sure now of our eternal life in the Home that Jesus went to prepare, may I ask your Most Gracious Majesty to read the following passages of Scripture: John 3:16; Romans 10:9,10? These passages prove that there is full assurance of salvation by faith in our Lord Jesus Christ for those who believe and accept His finished work. I sign myself, your servant for Jesus' sake, John Townsend.

In about two weeks he received a handwritten reply:

To John Townsend: Your letter of recent date I received and in reply would state that I have carefully and prayerfully read the portions of Scripture referred to. I believe in the finished work of Christ for me, and trust by God's grace to meet you in that Home of which He said, "I go to prepare a place for you." Victoria

When we confess who he is, the Sovereign, and believe in what he did – that he died and rose again for our salvation – we know whose we are now and forever. Amen.