

Dr. Craig Keener, Romans, Session 1,

Introduction

6-min. Video Overview

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You've probably heard of the Book of Romans. It's one of the most influential documents in all of Western history, seriously. It has shaped theology, politics, you name it, for 2,000 years.

But to really get a handle on its power, we're going to do something a little different. We're going to investigate it not just as some sacred text, but as what it actually was: a piece of ancient communication. A letter sent from one person to a very specific group of people in a specific time and place.

And you know, the impact this letter has had is, well, it's incredibly personal. Way back in the 18th century, a guy named John Wesley heard someone reading from a commentary on Romans, and he said it made him feel his heart strangely warmed. Think about that.

This single letter had a profound, totally life-changing effect on him, centuries after it was first written. So that's the big question, right? How? How could a letter written on papyrus and shipped across the Mediterranean Sea 2,000 years ago still have that kind of punch? Well, the answer, as it turns out, is hidden in the details, in the context, the sheer effort, and the brilliant strategy behind its creation. All right, so here's how we're going to crack this case.

We're going to treat this letter like a case file. First, we'll look at the anatomy of the epistle, the physical evidence. Then we'll learn to read between the lines and decode its cultural language.

We'll build a profile of the author, Paul, and then we'll travel to its destination, Ancient Rome, to really understand the scene. And finally, we'll see why all this context is the key to everything. Okay, first up, forensics.

We're going to analyze the physical properties of this letter, because when you put it side-by-side with other letters from that time, you realize right away, this was not your average piece of mail. Okay, so the first thing that just jumps out at you is the sheer scale of this thing. Just look at this.

The average personal letter that we found on papyrus from this era? About 87 words. Kind of like a long text message. Even the famous Roman orator Cicero, known for being wordy, averaged just under 300 words.

And Paul's letter to the Romans? Over 7,000 words. This wasn't a casual note. It was an absolute beast of a project.

And this wasn't just about time, even though it probably took over 11 hours just to dictate to a scribe. Scholars have estimated that the cost for the papyrus, plus the scribe's labor, would be the equivalent of over \$2,000 today. That is a massive financial commitment.

So right away, that tells us Paul was tackling a problem so big, he thought the solution was worth a small fortune. Okay, so we've seen the physical evidence. We know this letter was a huge deal.

Now, let's dig into the text itself to read between the lines and decode the cultural shorthand the author was using, a kind of code his original audience would have picked up on instantly. And to do that, we can use a cool concept from linguistics called relevance theory. It's actually a really simple idea: that all good communication relies on shared context.

If I say 9-11, you know exactly what I'm talking about without me having to explain the whole thing. We use this kind of shorthand all the time. Well, Paul did too, and to get Romans, we have to uncover the shorthand his audience already knew.

And here's a brilliant example of this right in the first sentence. The standard way to open a letter in Greek was with the word *kyrein*, which just means greetings. But Paul does a little switcheroo.

He uses the word *kadros*, or grace, which sounds similar, but is packed with theological meaning. Then he adds *Irene*, the Greek word for peace, which is also the direct translation of the standard Jewish greeting, *shalom*. Bam! Right from the get-go, he's weaving Greek and Jewish culture together in a single phrase.

But wait, he doesn't stop there. He takes it a step further. He says this grace and peace come from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, in the ancient world, a formal greeting wasn't just a hello. It was a blessing that called on a divine source. So by putting Jesus right next to God the Father as the source of this divine blessing, Paul is making an incredibly powerful statement about Jesus's status before he even gets into his main argument.

It's subtle, but it's genius. So, who is this guy, this author, who could pull off such a sophisticated piece of communication? Let's build a quick profile of Paul. He was not a simple figure at all.

He was this incredibly complex man standing right at the intersection of several ancient worlds. You know, when you look at how scholars describe Paul, you get all these different angles. Some see him as a Hellenistic or Greek-influenced Jew.

Others really focus on his deep training as a Pharisee in Jerusalem. Then you have the view of him as a cosmopolitan Roman citizen, or as a writer who knew his philosophy. The key isn't picking one.

The key is realizing he was all of these things at once, which put him in a unique position to talk to all these different cultures. So what you have here is this incredible blend of worlds,

and that gave Paul a huge advantage. He was from a city called Tarsus, which was a major hub for Greek philosophy.

But he also studied in Jerusalem under one of the most famous rabbis of the era, Gamaliel. This dual education gave him this amazing intellectual toolkit. It meant he could argue complex theological ideas using the language of both Jewish scripture and Greco-Roman philosophy.

All right. So to really get the why behind this massive, expensive, and brilliantly written letter, we have to travel back in time. We need to reconstruct the scene of its arrival.

The sprawling, chaotic, politically charged city of Rome right in the middle of the first century. I mean, try to picture it: a sprawling city of a million people. By far the biggest metropolis in the entire Mediterranean world.

And living inside this megacity was a pretty big Jewish community, maybe up to 50,000 people. Most of them were poor, living in these crowded apartment blocks across the Tiber River. It's into this complex, multilingual and really socially divided environment that Paul's letter is about to land.

Now, this is where it gets really interesting. To feel the urgency behind this letter, you have to understand the chaos of the previous decade. See, in A.D. 49, the Emperor Claudius kicked all the Jewish leaders out of Rome.

This meant that the early Christian groups there, which had Jewish roots, were suddenly made up of mostly non-Jewish or Gentile members. Five years later, Claudius dies. The order is lifted, and Jewish believers start coming back.

But they're returning to a community that has totally changed without them. Paul is writing his letter right into the heart of this tense, potentially explosive reunion. OK, so let's pull all these threads together.

We have a letter that was huge and expensive. It was written in this carefully blended cultural language. It was by a multicultural author, and it was sent to a city in the middle of some serious social turmoil.

Why does all of this background matter so much? It matters because it shows us that Rome isn't some dry, abstract theological textbook. Not at all. It's a masterclass in practical hands-on guidance.

Paul is taking his huge theological ideas about grace and faith and law, and he's applying them directly to a very real problem in Rome. How can Jewish and Gentile believers with completely different backgrounds and cultures actually live together as one community? The context turns the letter from just abstract ideas into concrete, urgent advice. And that really leaves us with a final, pretty powerful thought, doesn't it? By deconstructing Romans like this, by looking at it as a piece of communication, we unlock this much deeper, richer meaning.

It kind of makes you wonder what other historical texts, letters, or documents that we think we know might be hiding a more complex and fascinating story. Just waiting for us to investigate their context.