

# **Dr. Craig Keener, Romans, Session 2,**

## **Introduction, Romans 1**

### **6-min. Video Overview**

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Let's be honest, when you hear the book of Romans, your mind probably jumps to dense, heavy theology, right? But what if I told you it's not a textbook? It's a letter. A letter written to solve a very specific and very human crisis. This is a story of culture wars, deep division, and a radical solution that honestly changed everything.

So what was that problem? What was going on that was so serious it required, well, the most famous letter ever written? We're going to unpack the drama behind the doctrine and see why this ancient letter was written with such incredible urgency. All right, so our story starts right in the heart of the empire, in Rome. There's this young, vibrant church there, but it is absolutely tearing itself apart at the seams.

Now, to really get what's going on, you have to look at the history. So at first, this church was a mix of Jewish and Gentile believers, all worshiping together. But then in 49 AD, bam, the emperor Claudius kicks all the Jewish people out of the city.

For over five years, the church becomes almost completely Gentile. It develops its own culture, its own way of doing things. So when the Jewish Christians are finally allowed to come back home after 54 AD, they walk into a community that they just don't recognize at all.

And listen, this wasn't just some awkward reunion. This was a full-blown culture war. Can you just imagine being a Jewish Christian who has kept kosher your entire life, and you walk back into your church potluck, and there's pork on the menu? The tension was real, and it was deeply personal.

The conflict really centered on what scholars call conspicuous boundary markers. Now, that's just a fancy way of saying the things that defined who they were. These weren't small details.

We're talking about things like circumcision, those dietary laws, observing the Sabbath, and other holy days. These were supposed to be signs of their identity. And now, they were the very things causing all the fights.

Okay, so into this absolute mess steps the apostle Paul. He writes his letter, but not just to say, hey guys, be nice to each other. No, he's about to perform a kind of spiritual surgery.

And to do that, he first has to deliver a shocking diagnosis about what the real problem is. So Paul starts his argument in a really clever way. It's a way that would have made all the Jewish Christians in the room just nod along in total agreement.

He spends the whole first chapter laying out the case for why the Gentile world is spiritually lost, you know, completely cut off from God. And they're thinking, exactly, that's what we've been trying to tell them. But then, Paul pulls the rug right out from under them.

In chapters two and three, he completely flips the script. He turns his attention to his own people, the Jewish people. And he says that despite their amazing heritage, despite having the law, they are in the exact same boat.

They are also lost. This right here is the core of Paul's diagnosis. As the scholar Craig Keener puts it so bluntly, the summary of Romans chapter three is basically, everybody's damned.

See, the problem isn't the other group. The problem is universal. Nobody gets to claim the high ground here.

Now, that diagnosis sounds pretty devastating, right? But it's absolutely necessary. Because think about it. If the sickness is the same for everyone, that means the cure can be the same for everyone too.

And this is where Paul introduces the great equalizer. Paul's logic here is just, it's airtight. First, he establishes the universal problem we all share.

Then he systematically takes apart the old solutions that each group was holding onto for their identity. For the Jewish Christians, it was their ethnic heritage and keeping the law. For the Gentile Christians, it was their new freedom from that law.

Paul says neither one is enough. And all of this leads to his main point. There has to be a new shared solution that's available to everyone on the exact same terms.

And that is faith. And that is the revolutionary idea. One, not a Jewish way and a Gentile way.

There is one way for all people to be made right with God. This single idea completely demolishes the entire foundation their division was built on. But you know, Paul isn't just an abstract theologian.

He's a pastor. So after laying out this incredible theological foundation for 11 chapters, he totally switches gears. As one scholar famously said, he goes from preaching to meddling.

He starts applying these huge ideas directly to their messy everyday situation. And he connects the dots so clearly, it's brilliant. The big idea: God has accepted all of you on the very same terms.

The real-life rule: so you must accept one another. The big idea: the entire law is really about love. The real-life rule: stop judging each other over food and holidays, the very boundary markers that were causing the fight.

He takes the argument from theology right down to the dinner table. It's seamless. So you might be wondering who on earth could deliver this kind of message, a message that challenges both sides so fundamentally and actually be heard? Well, as it turns out, Paul was uniquely, and I mean perfectly, positioned for the job.

See, Paul wasn't just some third-party mediator. He lived this tension. He had a foot in both worlds.

He was a devout Jew, a Pharisee of all things. So he understood the deep importance of the law and their heritage. But he was also a Roman citizen by birth.

And he moved comfortably in the Gentile world. He could speak both languages, not just literally, but culturally. This dual identity was his superpower.

It gave him the credibility to look both the Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians in the eye and challenge their cultural pride because he was one of them. He wasn't some outsider pointing fingers. He was the man in the middle.

And what was his ultimate goal in all this? What was he aiming for? Well, the climax of the letter in chapter 15 lays it so beautifully. It's this vision of Jewish and Gentile believers worshiping God together with one unified voice, not as two separate groups, but as one reconciled family. And that leaves us with the timeless challenge of this letter.

Paul's logic is kind of inescapable, isn't it? If the ground is totally level at the foot of the cross, if everyone comes to God through the exact same door, how can we possibly justify building walls to keep each other out? It was a question that was urgent for the church in Rome, and it's just as urgent for us today.