

Dr. Craig Keener, Romans, Session 3,

Romans 1:2-17

6-min. Video Overview

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Okay, let's jump right in. The book of Romans. It's one of the most powerful, influential, and, let's be honest, kind of intimidating texts ever written.

It can feel like this huge mountain of theology, but today we're going to give you the key, a single passage that unlocks the central message of the entire letter. And here it is, Romans 1 verses 16 and 17. Now this isn't just a nice quote to put on a coffee mug.

This is it. This is Paul's thesis statement for the entire book. Everything he's about to argue, from sin and judgment to grace and new life, is all packed right into these two sentences.

If you can really get your head around this, you can get Romans. So what is Paul actually saying here? I mean, this is filled with huge, complex ideas, right? You've got gospel, power, righteousness, and faith. For the rest of this explainer, we are going to unpack this thing piece by piece so it all makes sense.

But before we can really tackle the thesis itself, we have to see the foundation Paul lays right before it. What does he need to establish first that makes this big statement so, well, so revolutionary? First off, what even is the gospel he's talking about? Paul is super clear here. It's not some new philosophy he just came up with.

No, he says it was promised a long, long time ago in the Old Testament, and it's all about one person, God's Son, Jesus. He was a real historical human, you know, a descendant of King David, but also divine, declared to be the son of God with world-changing power because of his resurrection from the dead. So what's Paul's personal mission in all this? He wants to bring about the obedience of faith.

Now that phrase is key. For Paul, faith isn't just about mentally agreeing with an idea. It's a radical, life-changing commitment, a deep trust that leads to a completely new way of living.

Okay, so with that foundation in place, let's get back to Paul's big thesis. We're going to start with that incredibly bold opening line: I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God. To really feel the punch of that line, you've got to understand the world Paul was living in.

The Roman Empire was built on an intense honor-shame culture. Your public status, your strength, your reputation- that was everything. Shame wasn't just being embarrassed.

It was social death. It meant you were a nobody. So just imagine standing up in that culture and declaring your total allegiance to a man who was executed by the Roman government in the most humiliating way possible: crucifixion.

To them, the message of the cross was absolute foolishness, the very definition of weakness. So when Paul says, I am not ashamed, it's this incredibly bold, counter-cultural claim. He's finding honor in what the world saw as ultimate shame.

So why isn't he ashamed? Because he says this message the world calls foolish is actually the power of God. And we're not talking about some vague philosophical idea here. Paul means the literal history-altering force that brought Jesus back from the dead.

He's arguing that the very same power is what brings salvation, transforming people from the inside out. And who is this power for? Well, it's for everyone. When Paul says to the Jew first and also to the Greek, he's making a really crucial point.

The story starts with Israel. It's totally rooted in God's specific promises to them. But it doesn't stop there.

The Greek here is basically shorthand for everybody else. This power is universally available. Now we get to tackle the second half of the thesis.

And this, this is really the intellectual core of the entire book. For in the gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith. So what in the world does Paul mean by the righteousness of God? This is one of the most important phrases in the whole letter.

And it's easy to get it wrong. We might think it just means God's moral perfection, like a standard of justice we have to meet. But Paul means something way more radical.

And this is crucial. It's not about our performance. It's about God's faithfulness, his power in action to put people right with himself.

It's a gift he gives, not a test we have to pass. This brings us to this huge idea of justification. And it's not just a legal loophole where God looks at a guilty person and kind of squints and pretends they're innocent.

It's a creative act. When God declares something, it becomes reality. So this is a transforming gift where God actually makes a person righteous.

And that starts a real process of change in them. And how do you receive this righteousness? Through faith. But again, we have to be careful with that word.

In our culture, faith can sound like wishful thinking, right? A blind leap in the dark. For Paul, faith is the total opposite. It's a deliberate step into the light.

It's a confident trust and reliance on who God is and what he has proven he can do. Paul then says, this righteousness is revealed from faith to faith. What does that mean? Well, it's simply that faith is the constant.

It's how you start the journey with God. And it's how you keep walking on from the very beginning to the very end. So we've got this powerful gospel that reveals God's active righteousness, and it's all received by faith.

But what's the bottom line? What's the ultimate result of all of this? And to make his final point, Paul doesn't just offer his own opinion. He reaches all the way back into the Jewish scriptures and quotes the ancient prophet Habakkuk. He's basically saying, see, this has been the plan all along.

The person who has made right with God through faith is the one who will truly live. And that idea of living is so rich here. It definitely means being rescued from judgment.

It means receiving eternal life, that resurrection kind of life that belongs to the world to come. But crucially, that new quality of life doesn't just wait until after we die. It starts right now, transforming our present reality.

And all of this leaves us with one final, unavoidable question. Paul has laid out this incredible good news, the power of God that saves. But if this is the rescue, what's the danger we're being rescued from? And with that question, Paul perfectly sets the stage for the entire next section of his letter.