

Dr. Craig Keener, Romans, Session 16,

Romans 15:29-16:7

6-min. Video Overview

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Welcome to The Explainer. Today we are unpacking the absolute master strategy of one of history's most influential figures, the Apostle Paul. And look, he wasn't just thinking about the next town over.

No, no. He was looking at a world map, and he was planning something on a truly epic scale. So, you get to the end of his letter to the Romans and BAM! Paul drops his plan, a breathtaking ambition.

His ultimate goal: Spain. Now, you got to understand, in the mind of the Roman world, Spain was it. It was literally the ends of the earth.

He wanted to go where no one had gone before and lay a brand new foundation. But this grand strategy, it wasn't some simple direct flight. Oh no, it was this complex three-stage mission, and every single stop had its own strategic goal and its own set of huge risks.

We're talking a dangerous trip east to Jerusalem, then a crucial stop in Rome, all before he could even think about launching that final mission west to Spain. Okay, so let's start at the end, right? Let's talk about that final audacious goal, the mission to Spain. This wasn't just another pin on the map.

This was a true venture into the unknown. A project that was absolutely designed to stretch him and his entire team to their limits. You see, Spain was a whole different ballgame.

In all his previous work, Paul kind of had this playbook he could rely on, right? He'd use the common Greek language; he'd start his ministry in the local synagogues. Well, in Spain, that playbook was totally useless. He was facing brand new language barriers, huge cultural barriers, and that meant he needed a completely new strategy and some serious, serious backing.

And that's why his stop in Rome was so critical. It wasn't just a social call. By telling the Roman Church, hey, I'm passing through on my way to Spain, he was making what was, you know, a culturally understood request for sponsorship.

He was basically saying, I need you guys to be my launch pad. He needed their money, their people, and yeah, probably even their interpreters for this massive mission. But hold on.

Before he could even dream of heading west to Spain, Paul had to take this incredibly dangerous detour east. He had to go back to Jerusalem, the very heart of the movement, for a mission that was just as critical and, you know what, potentially even more dangerous. And Paul knew it.

He knew this trip was unbelievably risky. He was not naive about the hostility waiting for him there. It was so dangerous, in fact, that he specifically asked the believers in Rome to pray for two very specific, very critical things.

Okay, so first, he's asking for prayers for his own safety, to be rescued from the people in Judea who were dead set against his work with non-Jews. But just as important, he prayed for a diplomatic win. He needed the financial offering he was bringing to actually be accepted by the leaders in Jerusalem.

I mean, if either one of those things failed, his entire global strategy could have just collapsed. Which, of course, brings us to the collection itself. And let me be clear.

This was way more than just a simple act of charity. This was a deeply symbolic, powerful statement about the nature of the entire movement. It was absolutely packed with political and spiritual meaning.

So at the heart of it all was Paul's core idea of reciprocity. He saw it as a two-way street. You know, the mother church in Jerusalem had shared its spiritual wealth, the gospel itself, with the non-Jewish world.

So now, in Paul's mind, those non-Jewish churches had a kind of obligation, a debt to repay, by sharing their material wealth in return. Yeah, he literally framed it as a debt. It was this tangible way for the newer Gentile churches to honor the original community back in Jerusalem.

And more than that, it was a powerful demonstration that they were all part of one unified body. It was about breaking down those ancient walls between Jew and Gentile. And this is where you really see his strategic mind at work.

I mean, it's brilliant. To guarantee total transparency and shut down any accusations of shady business, Paul had representatives from each of the donating regions travel with him. It was basically a masterclass in non-profit accountability, first century style.

Their presence was a living, breathing symbol of commitment, making sure everyone knew the money was being handled with complete integrity. So as you can probably guess, this huge international undertaking wasn't a solo act. Not even close.

Paul relied on a sophisticated and incredibly capable network of trusted colleagues. And what's really important to see here is that many of them were women holding key leadership positions. Okay, so the first person he commends is this remarkable woman named Phoebe.

She's from Cenchrea, which was a port near Corinth. And get this, she held three crucial leadership roles. She was the trusted letter bearer; she was an official minister, a diakonos; and she was a benefactor, a prostatus, which means she was a wealthy patron who probably hosted a church right in her own home.

Now, being the letter bearer wasn't like being a mail carrier. No, she would have been responsible for the first reading and the first explanation of its incredibly dense, complex arguments. Just think about that for a second.

The very first interpreter of Paul's most profound theological letter was a woman. Next up, he greets his fellow workers, Prisca and Aquila. This was a real power couple in the early church.

And listen to this: in Paul's own words, they had literally risked their necks for him. These weren't just supporters on the sideline; they were partners who put their actual lives on the line for the mission. And here's a really fascinating detail that's kind of buried in the text.

So if you do the math, Paul greets about twice as many men as women in this chapter. But, and this is a big but, he specifically commends a much, much higher proportion of the women for their labor in the gospel. Proportionally, he's praising the active ministry of women, something like four times as often as the men.

That's pretty amazing. Okay. So all of this leads us to what might be the most startling greeting in the entire letter.

It's a potential bombshell that's been debated for centuries, and it's been hiding in plain sight this whole time. He greets Andronicus and Junia, who were very likely a husband and wife team. And just look at their resume here.

They were fellow Jews, they'd been in prison for their faith, and this is crucial: they became believers before Paul did. They were actually his seniors in the movement. And then he just drops this incredible line.

He describes both of them as being outstanding among the apostles. Not just apostles, mind you, outstanding apostles. So this leaves us with a pretty provocative final thought, and it comes straight from the text itself.

Paul's own words raise a powerful question that we have to ask ourselves. What does it mean for how we understand the early church if one of its most highly regarded senior apostles was in fact a woman named Junia?