

Dr. Craig Keener, Acts, Session 8

Podcast Audio Overview

Acts 3-4

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Welcome back, everyone. We're diving deep into the book of Acts today, chapters three through five. It's all about the early Christian movement in Jerusalem, you know, just after Pentecost.

And we have an awesome guide for this journey, a lecture series by biblical scholar Dr. Craig Keener. Oh, Dr. Keener is fantastic. He really brings the historical and theological context to life.

Exactly. And, you know, we're talking miracles, confrontations with authority. This community is really grappling with what it means to live out their faith in a world that's increasingly hostile.

So we'll uncover those strategies the apostles used, the challenges they faced from inside and outside the movement. It's amazing how Dr. Keener peels back the layers of these stories, right? Like stories we think we know. He reveals the power dynamics, the social tensions, even moral dilemmas that shaped this really pivotal period.

Yeah, for sure. And I think a good place to start is with that healing of the lame man at the temple gate, you know, the one called the Gate Beautiful. Right.

And Dr. Keener points out that this location was strategically chosen. It wasn't random at all. This was prime real estate for begging, you know, a place where the desperation of the poor and the piety of the wealthy kind of collided.

So this miracle happening in such a public and symbolic location, you know, it was bound to get attention. What I find interesting is how this healing is like a springboard for Peter's sermon. It wasn't just a display of power.

It was a strategic act designed to draw a crowd and deliver a message. Absolutely. And Dr. Keener argues that Peter's sermon was carefully crafted to resonate with his audience, you know, with their hopes and fears.

He references the prophet like Moses and the restoration of all things. These weren't just random scriptures. He was tapping into that deep Jewish longing for a messianic figure.

Yeah, someone to usher in a new era. Yeah. Makes you wonder if some of that crowd, you know, might have seen this healing and thought, could this be the one? Could this Jesus who they say has risen from the dead be the fulfillment of those prophecies? Right.

It's a powerful question. And Dr. Keener suggests that Peter's message, while offering hope, also contained a challenge. He introduced this concept of corporate guilt.

You know, the idea that even those who weren't directly involved in Jesus's death still bear some responsibility. That was a radical concept for the time. Yeah.

It makes you think about our own responsibility for the injustices that happen today. You know, the ways in which we might be complicit in systems that perpetuate suffering, even if we don't actively participate in them. Absolutely.

A timeless challenge and one that was central to the early Christian message. But Peter doesn't leave his audience in despair. He offers a way out.

Repentance. Turning away from those systems and turning back towards God. OK, so then there's the restoration of all things concept.

It's hopeful, but also a bit mysterious. What did Peter mean by that? Well, Dr. Keener suggests that Peter was tapping into Jewish expectations of a messianic age rite, a time of renewal and transformation, even a new creation. But he goes further, arguing that this restoration wasn't just about a future event, but a present reality, a transformation that begins in the hearts of individuals and then ripples outward, impacting communities and ultimately the world.

That's a fascinating interpretation. It suggests the kingdom of God isn't just a far-off destination, but something we can experience right here, right now, through acts of love, justice, and mercy. But not everyone was receptive to this message, right?

The Sadducees, in particular, seem threatened by the apostles' preaching. Oh, absolutely. The Sadducees, with their control of the temple and their strict interpretation of the law, felt their authority challenged by this new movement that claimed to have witnessed the resurrection of Jesus.

So it wasn't just a theological disagreement. It was a power struggle. The Sadducees had a vested interest in maintaining the status quo.

And the apostles, with their message of radical change and their growing popularity, were disrupting that order. Exactly. And the way they responded to this opposition was remarkable.

When they were arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin, they didn't back down or try to appease the authorities. They spoke with what Dr. Keener calls *parousia*, a boldness and frankness that challenged the very notion of who had the right to speak truth. Yeah.

And who had the power to define what was acceptable religious belief. Right. It's like they were saying, we've seen the risen Christ.

We've experienced the power of the Holy Spirit, and no earthly authority can silence that truth. And their courage had a ripple effect. After they were released, the believers gathered and prayed.

They prayed for continued boldness and for God to show his power through signs and wonders. And their prayer was answered in a very tangible way. The place shook, right? It's such a vivid detail.

It speaks to the sense of awe and wonder surrounding this early movement. These weren't just people preaching a message. They were experiencing the power of God in a way that was impossible to ignore.

For sure. And that power manifested in miracles, in bold proclamations, and in their radical generosity. The story of Barnabas selling a field and giving the proceeds to the apostles to distribute to the poor.

It's a striking example of how this community was living out their faith. They were creating a countercultural society within Jerusalem, one based on sharing compassion and a deep commitment to caring for those in need. But this generosity wasn't without its complexities, as the story of Ananias and Sapphira reveals.

Yes, this story, juxtaposed with the example of Barnabas, highlights that tension between genuine faith and the temptation to misrepresent oneself, especially in a community undergoing such intense spiritual fervor. It makes you wonder what motivated Ananias and Sapphira. Were they trying to gain status? Were they afraid of being left out? Or were they simply struggling with their own doubts and insecurities? It's a good question.

Dr. Keener doesn't offer easy answers, but he suggests that this incident served as a sobering reminder that genuine faith is about more than just outward appearances. It's about a deep transformation of the heart that leads to authentic acts of love, generosity, and integrity. This is a good place to pause for now.

When we come back, we'll continue exploring the events of Acts 3-5, focusing on how the early Christians navigated that growing conflict with the authorities, and how their message continued to spread despite the challenges they faced. That story of Ananias and Sapphira, it's a stark reminder, isn't it? About the high stakes of hypocrisy within the early church. Yeah, but you know, we can't forget about the rest of the community.

Their faith, their boldness, their generosity- it really drew people in, and that worried the authorities even more. So this growing popularity of the visible miracles, it sounds like it was setting the stage for a showdown. It really was.

More than just theological differences, a fundamental clash of power, you know, a clash of worldviews. You mentioned earlier that the Sadducees rejected the resurrection. Was that the only issue, or was there more to this conflict? Well, think about the Sadducees.

They held a privileged position in Jerusalem. They controlled the temple; they had the ear of the Roman authorities; their interpretation of the law was everything. Then along came these apostles claiming Jesus had risen, performing healings, preaching a message that challenged everything.

Yeah, no wonder they felt threatened. It's like they were saying, we don't need your temple, we don't need your rituals, we have access to God directly. Exactly.

Dr. Kiener argues that the Sadducees saw this movement as a direct threat to their power. Maybe even to Roman stability. Right.

The Romans were always wary of anything that could cause unrest. So when the apostles were arrested in Acts chapter 5, it wasn't just random persecution. It was a calculated move to squash this movement.

That's a key insight. This confrontation with the Sanhedrin wasn't just a debate. It was a power struggle playing out on a public stage.

And how did the apostles respond? They doubled down on their message, right? Exactly. They spoke with that same boldness that Perugia, it's like their time in prison, emboldened them further. Like they were saying, you can imprison us, you can threaten us, but you can't silence the truth.

This reminds me of something Dr. Kiener said about the early Christians' view of Jesus as the ultimate benefactor. How did that fit into this? Oh, good point. The apostles argued they were simply doing good in Jesus' name.

He was the source of all good deeds, the ultimate benefactor. That's brilliant. They shifted the focus from their alleged disobedience to the hypocrisy of condemning compassion and healing.

True, but their boldness didn't win over everyone in the council. So what happened? The Sadducees remained opposed, but some others were more hesitant. This guy Gamaliel, a respected Pharisee, cautioned against hasty action.

He said, if this is of men, it will fail, but if it's of God, you won't be able to stop it. You might even be fighting against God. Wow.

That's powerful. It suggests that some recognized this movement might be more than a fad. It had a power they couldn't explain.

And despite the opposition, the Christians thrived. Their faith, their community, their commitment to Jesus' message. It was unstoppable.

So the stage is set for the next chapter. They faced down persecution, they wrestled with tough questions, and through it all, they spread the message of Jesus. And that's where we'll pick up next time.

We'll explore how they took that message to the wider world, a journey that would change everything. So we've seen these early believers facing pressure from outside, you know, the authorities trying to shut them down. Right.

But it wasn't just external pressure. Dr. Keener points out that they were also wrestling with some big questions internally. About the future of the movement.

Exactly. Like, who was this message for? Was it just for the Jewish people or was it meant for everyone? That question was becoming really urgent. So this is the beginning of what we now call the mission to the Gentiles, a major turning point for Christianity.

What led to this shift? Was it a sudden thing or more of a gradual evolution? Well, Dr. Keener suggests it was a bit of both. There were a few things happening at the same time. The persecution in Jerusalem definitely played a role.

The believers were scattered. They had to share their faith in new places. So it wasn't just about escaping danger.

They were planting seeds of faith almost unintentionally. Yeah. Like that saying, the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.

But it wasn't just circumstance. There was also this growing sense that the Holy Spirit was leading them, you know, guiding them to share the gospel beyond Judaism. I bet there was some pushback, though.

That must have been hard for those early Jewish believers. This idea that their faith, so deeply rooted in their heritage, was meant for the whole world. Oh, there was definitely tension.

But a key turning point came with the conversion of Cornelius, a Roman centurion. You can read about it in Acts chapter 10. It's a fascinating story with not one, but two visions.

Oh, yeah. The one where Peter's told to eat unclean animals, a clear symbol of breaking down barriers. Yes.

It challenged Peter's deepest understanding of what was ritually pure. And at the same time, Cornelius, a devout Gentile, he has a vision telling him to send for Peter. So God's orchestrating this encounter, pushing both of them out of their comfort zones.

Exactly. And when they finally meet, Peter's still processing his vision, and he preaches the gospel to Cornelius and his whole household. And the Holy Spirit falls upon them just like at Pentecost.

Wow. That must have sent shockwaves through the early church. Oh, it did.

There were debates and disagreements, but it became a turning point. It solidified the understanding that God's love and salvation were for everyone, no matter who you were or where you came from. So we end this deep dive with a sense of awe at the power of this movement, its ability to grow and adapt, and its unwavering commitment to spreading the message of Jesus, even when it meant challenging their own beliefs and cultural norms.

It's inspiring, isn't it? What strikes me is the courage of these early believers. Persecution, tough questions, and yet they never wavered in their commitment to living out their faith and sharing it. They understood that true faith isn't passive.

It's active, outward-focused. It compels us to love our neighbors, to care for the vulnerable, to speak truth to power, even when it's hard. Powerful words.

And as we reflect on these stories, we're challenged to think about how we can do the same. How can we be agents of healing, hope, and transformation? Because the world needs it now more than ever. It's a question worth asking.

And as we face the challenges of our own time, the stories of these early believers offer us inspiration, guidance, and a reminder that even when things seem impossible, faith, love, and hope have the power to change the world. Thank you for joining us on this deep dive into Acts 3 to 5. We hope you've gained some new insights into the early Christian movement and the enduring power of their message, a message that still resonates today.