

Dr. Craig Keener, Acts, Session 10

Podcast Audio Overview

Acts 6:8-8:4

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All right, so are you ready to explore early Christianity? Today, we're taking a deep dive into Acts chapters six through eight, focusing on, well, honestly, kind of a power struggle, a courtroom drama, and the incredible spread of this new faith. And to get this, our main source is actually a lecture series on Acts by Dr. Craig Keener. Ah, Keener, yeah.

He's awesome. He really brings the ancient world to life and uncovers layers of meaning that I definitely would not have caught on my own. What I think is so fascinating about these chapters is how they go beyond these abstract ideas.

We're meeting real people who are dealing with some really complex issues, stuff that we can relate to even today. Take Stephen's story, for instance. It all begins with this conflict in the synagogue of the freedmen.

Synagogue of the freedmen. Okay, you got to tell me more about that. What is the story there? So these were Jewish people who had been enslaved by the Romans.

Oh, wow. Often captured during Pompey's conquests. But here's the thing.

Other Jewish communities, especially those in Rome, actually raised money, like funds, to buy their freedom. So these freedmen had like a completely unique experience. They went through slavery and then liberation.

Exactly. I can only imagine how that would have shaped their perspective within the Jewish community. Absolutely.

And many of them, because they had lived in Rome, were Hellenistic Jews, meaning they were much more comfortable with Greek culture and language. Right, right. And this probably, you know, created some friction with more conservative Jewish groups.

Ah, so we're already seeing like this tension building up within the early church, even before the really serious persecution even begins. Yeah. It's like these fault lines just waiting to erupt.

It is. And to make it even more real, more tangible, there's an inscription that was found in Jerusalem, dedicated by a guy named Theodotus, and his father had a Roman name. And this could actually be evidence of this very synagogue we're talking about, like a real tangible link to the story we're reading.

That is mind-blowing. It's like those archaeological discoveries that suddenly make the past feel so real. You know what I mean? It really does.

This isn't just some ancient story, you know? These were real people wrestling with faith, identity, belonging. Yeah. Just like we do today.

You know what strikes me is how much I can relate to like the debates that Stephen was having. He's described as full of the spirit and wisdom and, you know, someone who could really defend his beliefs. Yeah.

And I find myself in those kinds of discussions a lot, especially when like faith and reason collide. That's a powerful connection. And this is what leads to the accusations against Stephen.

Okay. These accusations of blasphemy against the law and the temple. Hold on.

Blasphemy. Okay. That's a pretty serious accusation, right? What were the consequences of something like that back then? Oh, yeah.

They were deadly serious in that context. Wow. This wasn't just some religious doctrine.

Right. This was interplaying with their Jewish national identity, even Roman law. To speak against the temple was seen as an attack on God and their entire society.

So Stephen wasn't just like facing a theological debate or something. No. He was in a full-on political and social firestorm.

Exactly. Yeah. It's like when you have modern-day figures making pronouncements of judgment on their country.

Oh, yeah. Like think of Jeremiah Wright or Pat Robertson. They both received a lot of criticism for their statements.

We're not trying to take sides here or anything. Right. Just showing how history can really illuminate some of these dynamics.

For sure. It's a reminder that religion and politics can be a volatile mix. Oh, for sure.

When those two worlds collide, things can get really explosive. So, facing some serious accusations, like how does Stephen respond? Does he like back down at all? Not a chance. He gives this powerful speech.

And he masterfully uses Old Testament history to build his case. Okay. And he draws these parallels between Abraham, Joseph, Moses, and then ultimately Jesus.

It sounds like he knew how to use Scripture to really make a point. So did he just like quote verses? No. Or was there something more to it? He was super skillful.

Okay. He actually subtly challenged the assumptions of his accusers. So, for example, by emphasizing how Moses received the law on Mount Sinai.

Right. Stephen is subtly saying that the temple in Jerusalem isn't the only holy place. So he's using their own sacred texts to broaden their understanding of God.

Yeah. Pretty clever and probably pretty risky too. Oh, for sure.

And he does all this with really clever wordplay and storytelling techniques that were common in his day to really build a compelling case that ultimately turns the charges back on his accusers. Whoa, this is getting intense. It's like a courtroom drama unfolding.

So what happens next? Well, you know, despite his eloquence, the crowd they get enraged. Oh, wow. They drag him outside the city and stone him.

Oh man, that's brutal. That must've been terrifying for the other believers, right? I mean, did they just scatter and hide? Well, you might think that, but it's actually the opposite. Really? Stephen's death is this turning point, but it doesn't end there.

It's like his martyrdom throws open these doors for the message to go even further. You're talking about the scattering of the believers, right? Yeah. But that seems kind of counterintuitive, doesn't it? You would think that persecution would make people hide their beliefs.

It does, doesn't it? But Dr. Akina makes this really interesting argument. He says that the believers who faced the absolute worst persecution actually had the strongest commitment to their faith. I can see that.

Yeah. It's like when you're facing real danger, you can't just pretend anymore. Right.

You have to really count the cost. Right. And decide if it's worth the risk.

Exactly. And Keener draws this really fascinating parallel to the seven churches of Asia Minor in Revelation. Oh yeah, I remember those.

Remember that? Some were praised for their perseverance, and others were criticized for compromising. The ones that faced the most pressure, but didn't give up, are the ones that Jesus commends. Yeah.

That's a powerful image. It's like going through fire. You know, it can purify and strengthen us in ways that comfort and ease never could.

So what about those who were scattered? What happened to them? Well, they took their faith with them and ended up spreading the gospel to new regions. Okay. Keener really highlights Philip's journey.

Okay. Which is full of these God-working-in-mysterious-ways moments. Oh yeah, Philip.

His story is amazing. Remind me what he does after he leaves Jerusalem. First, he ends up in Samaria.

Okay. And remember that Samaria and Judea had this super complicated relationship, right? There was all this historical baggage and religious differences, but Philip goes there anyway and sparks this powerful revival. So we're already seeing the gospel break down barriers, even from the very beginning.

Oh yeah. It's like it transcends all those ethnic and cultural divides. Absolutely.

And Luke doesn't just tell us that Philip preached. He actually performs signs and wonders. He heals the sick.

He casts out demons, God's power on full display. So we have Philip leading this revival in Samaria, and then things take this sudden turn, right? God leads him to this single individual, an Ethiopian court official who's traveling through the desert. And honestly, after all that excitement in Samaria, this part always feels like a bit of a letdown to me.

Yeah. A lot of people feel that way about this part of the story. Yeah.

But Keener, he sees this as something deliberate, like a foreshadowing of how far the gospel is going to reach. Okay. I'm listening.

Explain it to me. Okay. So think about it.

The Ethiopian eunuch was a high-ranking official from a distant land. Right. So by guiding Philip to him, God is showing that his message isn't just for the Jews or even just those within the Roman Empire.

It's for everyone, everywhere. I see what you're saying. It's like zooming out from what's happening in Samaria to this much bigger picture of God's plan for the world.

And remember, in the ancient world, Ethiopia was like the southernmost point of the known world. Right. So it really represents the ends of the earth that Jesus talked about.

Wow. So this encounter, this seemingly small encounter with one traveler is actually a big step in the gospel's journey outward. Exactly.

And it's not an accident that Luke includes so much detail about the Ethiopian eunuch's background and his sincere desire to understand the scriptures. He's not just some random guy on the road. Right.

He's a seeker, you know? He's already involved in the Jewish faith and wants to learn more. Exactly. And his encounter with Philip shows how the Holy Spirit can prepare hearts in these really unexpected places, bringing people from all different walks of life to the truth.

It really makes you wonder: how is God working in ways we don't even see? Right. How is he preparing people we might never expect to be open to the message? That's a great question. And it reminds us that even small acts of obedience, like Philip responding to that seemingly random prompt from the Holy Spirit, can have huge ripple effects.

So we've seen the scattering of believers, the spread of the gospel to Samaria, and now this encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch. It really highlights how unstoppable the early church was, even when they were facing so much opposition. But we can't forget that Saul is still out there, right? That's right.

He's still trying to destroy this movement. He is. And Saul's role in all of this is really fascinating.

And we're going to unpack that more in the next part of our deep dive. Okay. Before we do, I'm curious, what has stood out to you so far about Philip's journey? Wow.

You know, I'm still processing everything we talked about in the last part. It's one thing to read about martyrdom in the Bible, you know, but to really dig into the historical context, the personal cost, it's powerful. It is.

It is. But there's this sense of hope that's just woven through the whole narrative, even in the middle of tragedy. Stephen's death, it's horrific, but it's like planting a seed, and that seed leads to even greater growth for the kingdom.

That's a really beautiful way to put it. And speaking of seeds being planted, we left off talking about what happened after Stephen's stoning. You mentioned that his burial was really significant.

Why is that? Okay. So in the ancient world, dying without a burial, that was like the ultimate dishonor. It meant your body was just left out to decay, exposed to the elements and everything.

It was a fate worse than death for many people. So even in death, there was this element of respect and dignity that was super important. Exactly.

And Jewish law actually commanded burial no matter what. Okay. But here's where it gets interesting.

You were absolutely forbidden from publicly mourning condemned criminals. Really? So Stephen's friends were in a tough spot. They wanted to give him a proper burial.

Right. But doing that openly could put them at risk. Absolutely.

But Keener points out that these devout men took that risk. Wow. They defied the rules and mourned Stephen's death publicly.

That's a really powerful statement. It's like they're saying we will not be silenced by fear. Exactly.

And Keener suggests that this act of courage was even more significant because it was probably Stephen's fellow Hellenistic Jews, the very people Saul was targeting, who stepped forward to bury him. That's incredible. Yeah.

Even when they were in danger, they refused to abandon him. It really shows their commitment to each other and to their faith. It does.

And it brings us to those closing verses of chapter eight, where Luke sums up everything that happened after Stephen's death. He writes, So even though they bury Stephen, his friends and the other believers still can't escape the persecution. Yeah.

It's only getting worse. Yeah, that's right. But notice what else Luke says.

He says, So the very thing that was meant to silence them actually spreads the message even further. It's that unintended consequence that we were talking about earlier. Exactly.

And the irony is that Saul, who's trying so hard to stop this movement, right? he actually becomes the reason it grows. It's like trying to put out a fire with gasoline.

Uh-huh. Yeah. The harder he tries to put it out, the more it spreads.

Exactly. And it all goes back to what Jesus told his disciples in Acts 1:8. Right. To be his witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. Yeah.

Stephen's death, as awful as it was, becomes like this key moment in God's plan. It does. It makes you think: how many other times in history has God used what seemed like setbacks or tragedies to bring about his purposes? That's a question we should all ask ourselves.

And it challenges us to look past our immediate circumstances, to trust that even when things are really dark, God is working to create a story that's bigger than we can imagine. And maybe, just like those devout men who buried Stephen, we are all called to be part of that story. Yeah.

Even when it's scary or uncomfortable. That's a powerful thought. How do you think God might be calling you to be a witness even when things are difficult or uncertain? Yeah.

What seeds of faith could you plant today knowing that even small acts of courage and obedience can change the world in ways we can't even see? That's a challenge, but it's also super inspiring. Stephen's story reminds us that the gospel can't be stopped. It can't be contained.

And even though it might cost us a lot, the reward is beyond measure. Thanks for taking this deep dive with us today. We'll see you next time.