

Dr. Craig Keener, Acts, Session 14

Podcast Audio Overview

Acts 12-13

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Welcome to our deep dive into early Christian history. We're going to be exploring chapters 12 and 13 of the Book of Acts. Oh, yeah.

Some really exciting stuff in those chapters. Definitely. And to help us unpack it all, we've got a lecture by biblical historian Dr. Craig Keener.

He's a great scholar. Lots of insights to glean from him, for sure. Absolutely.

And it's going to be quite a journey. We're going to see how the early church dealt with some really intense persecution. Yeah, they faced some real trials.

We're also going to see God's power at work and how the Christian message starts to spread even further beyond Jerusalem. That's right. It's a story of resilience, faith, and really audacious mission.

For sure. So let's dive right in. Dr. Keener really emphasizes this figure of Herod Agrippa I. He was this really powerful king, right? Oh, yeah.

He was a major player in Judea at the time. And he seemed really eager to please his Jewish subjects, especially the more conservative factions. Right.

He wanted to solidify his power, and he knew who to align himself with. It's fascinating how Dr. Keener even mentions Herod's lineage. Like it was a big deal for his popularity.

Well, think about it. Judea in the year 41 AD. Herod Agrippa I ascends to the throne.

He's the first Jewish king since Herod the Great. That in itself is pretty significant. It is.

But there's more. His grandmother was a Hasmonean princess. What does that mean exactly? She was a descendant of the Maccabees.

Oh, wow. The Maccabees. Weren't they like legendary heroes in Jewish history? Exactly.

They fought for Jewish independence and religious freedom a couple of centuries earlier. So Herod Agrippa, with his connection to them, embodied that legacy of resistance. So people saw him as someone who could bring back the glory days.

Absolutely. He represented this hope for national pride, for a return to their roots. It was a powerful connection for people.

So he was shrewdly using this ancestral connection to boost his own popularity. You got it. And what better way to do that than to go after a perceived threat to traditional Judaism.

Enter the Christians. That's where things take a dark turn, right? With the execution of James, the brother of John. It's a grim reminder of the kind of power Herod wielded.

It's interesting, though, because it's not the first time we hear about a Herod ordering a beheading. Yeah, it's almost like a chilling echo of John the Baptist's execution. Right.

By Herod Antipas. Exactly. Both John the Baptist and James, these prominent figures in the early Christian movement, met their end at the hands of the Herod family.

It's a pretty disturbing pattern. It is. But there's also a crucial difference here.

Herod Antipas needed Rome's approval to execute John the Baptist. Because he was only a Tetrarch. Right.

Not a full-fledged king. Exactly. But Herod Agrippa I had absolute authority in Judea and didn't need anyone's permission.

That really highlights the danger the early Christians were in. They were living under a ruler who could act with impunity. And it gets even more intense when Herod imprisons Peter.

And Dr. Keener points out the timing of this was no coincidence. Nope. It happens during the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

The same time period when Jesus was crucified. Exactly. Herod was using this sacred time for maximal impact.

It was a blatant warning to the Christians. And probably a form of gruesome entertainment for the crowds, too. Sadly, you're probably right.

But amidst all this darkness, there's a glimmer of hope. While Peter is facing this dire situation, the rest of the church is doing what they do best. Praying.

Praying fervently for his release. And then, in the dead of night, something incredible happens. An angel appears.

An angel appears to Peter, frees him from his chains, and leads him right past the guards. It sounds almost too fantastic to be true. Dr. Keener even says there were 16 guards involved.

Four guarding Peter at any given time, working in shifts. How does he just slip past them all? Like, what happened to those guards? Well, they certainly weren't sleeping on the job. We know that Herod had them interrogated.

Probably under torture. Oh, most definitely. But no one could explain it.

In the end, he had them all executed. For negligence. Standard Roman practice in a capital case.

But for those who believe, Peter's escape is a clear sign of divine intervention. It really makes you wonder if those guards ever questioned their own beliefs after that. It's certainly a possibility.

So where does Peter go after this miraculous escape? Back to the church. He heads straight to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark. Where a prayer meeting is happening? You know it.

And it's a scene full of these little details that really bring it to life. Peter knocks on the gate, and Rhoda, the serving girl, recognizes him. She must have been so relieved.

Oh, absolutely. But she's so excited, she runs to tell everyone before even letting him in. And of course, they don't believe her at first.

They think she's lost it. They even suggest it might be Peter's ghost. That's so interesting, isn't it? This recurring theme of disbelief in the face of miracles.

It's like experiencing God's power firsthand is so extraordinary, it's hard to grasp it at first. Like our minds just can't comprehend it. Right.

It takes a moment for the reality to sink in. Makes you wonder how many miracles we miss in our own lives because we're too busy doubting. That's a good point.

But eventually, they let Peter in, and he tells them the whole story. Further proof that prayer works. Exactly.

But meanwhile, remember Herod, the king who just had those guards executed. I'm guessing his actions had some consequences. You could say that.

So ambassadors from Tyre and Sidon arrive, seeking an audience with Herod. Why were they so desperate to see him? Well, they relied on Judea for food imports, and it seems Herod had been withholding them. So they were basically at his mercy.

They were practically groveling, showering him with praise and flattery. And Herod was the showman that he was. Whoa, he ate it up.

He accepted their adoration as though he were a god. That's a dangerous game to play. It is.

And according to both Dr. Keener and historical accounts of Josephus, it's at this moment that things go very wrong for Herod. He's suddenly struck down by this gruesome illness. Talk about instant karma.

Right. And five days later, he's dead, writhing in agony. It's a pretty dramatic turn of events.

This powerful king who tried to stamp out the Christian message is brought low. And Peter, who faced certain death, is miraculously delivered. It really is a stark contrast.

It's a powerful reminder that God is in control. And that pride and arrogance have consequences. Absolutely.

So with James martyred and Peter having to flee, what's next for the early Christians? Where do they go from here? That's a great question. And it takes us away from Jerusalem for a bit to another really important city in early Christian history, Antioch. Antioch.

Yeah, I've heard that name before. Dr. Keener makes it sound like Antioch was this buzzing hub. Oh, it was a thriving community, really diverse.

And it played a pivotal role in spreading the Christian message. It seems like it was a very different vibe from Jerusalem. It was.

You see, Antioch became a major center for sending out missionaries. Missionaries. That's pretty interesting.

Wasn't that a new concept at the time? It was. It wasn't common practice in Judaism. And you know what that suggests? What? That the good news of Jesus was meant for everyone, not just the Jewish people.

And that's where these two key figures come in: Barnabas and Saul. Oh, yeah. Saul, who later becomes the Apostle Paul, right? Weren't they already in Antioch earlier, bringing famine relief from there to Jerusalem? That's right.

They had traveled back and forth. And now they're being called back to Antioch for a completely different purpose. Become missionaries.

Exactly. And Dr. Keener emphasizes how this call really confirms a precious call they had received from God. You know, like sometimes you feel a nudge from God, but then he really makes it clear.

Yeah, that feeling of knowing you're exactly where you're supposed to be. It can be pretty powerful. And their first journey takes them to Cyprus, Barnabas's home turf.

Ah, so they set sail from Antioch. They did. Think about it.

Roughly 400 miles back to Antioch from Jerusalem and then another 60 miles by sea to Cyprus. That was no small feat in those days. Wow.

Yeah, travel back then was a completely different beast. No GPS, no planes. I can't imagine.

I know, right? But Dr. Keener shed some light on how they would have traveled, likely joining caravans for safety. Smart move. Safety in numbers, right? Absolutely.

And once they reached Asia Minor, they would have followed the Via Sebastia, also known as the Augustus Highway. The Augustus Highway. So they had superhighways back then, too.

You bet. Roman engineering at its finest. Built for swift military movement.

But why Cyprus? Was it just because Barnabas was from there or was there something more strategic about it? Well, that was definitely a factor. Plus, Cyprus had a large Jewish population. Ah, OK.

So it was a natural starting point for their mission. Exactly. They began preaching in the synagogues of Seleucia, a big city on the eastern coast.

Wait a minute. Paul preaching in synagogues. Didn't he primarily focus on the Gentiles? That's a common misconception.

While Paul's ministry definitely expanded to the Gentiles, he never abandoned his heart for his own people. Dr. Keener points out that in his letters, Paul actually mentions being beaten in synagogues multiple times. Really? So he kept going back.

He did. He understood the importance of sharing the gospel with both Jews and Gentiles. So they preached in Seleucia, and then where did they go? From Seleucia, they traveled to Paphos, the Roman capital of the island.

And that's where they had this fascinating encounter with the pro-consul Sergius Paulus. Dr. Keener mentions that Sergius Paulus was actually a historical figure. Oh, yeah.

Luke got his facts straight. Sergius Paulus was indeed the pro-consul of Cyprus during that time. This kind of historical accuracy really strengthens our confidence in Luke's account.

You know? Definitely. So who is Sergius Paulus and why is he so important to the story? He was a man of intelligence, a seeker of truth. And get this.

He had a Jewish magician in his court. A magician? That seems a bit contradictory, doesn't it? Weren't there strict rules against magic in Judaism? You'd think so. Right.

But as Dr. Keener explains, Jewish magicians were actually quite famous in the Roman Empire, even though they were kind of looked down upon by more pious Jews. They were believed to have secret knowledge, especially about the name of God. So they had this kind of mystical appeal.

Exactly. And it seems that this magician, his name was Elmas bar Jesus, was trying to use his influence to oppose Paul and Barnabas. Talk about a clash of worldviews.

The message of the gospel versus the allure of magic. It's a classic showdown. Elmas tries to stop Paul and Barnabas from sharing the gospel with Sergius Paulus.

But Paul, now using his Roman name, steps up. He rebukes Elmas and, according to the text, strikes him blind. Wow, that's intense.

Was this a common tactic for early Christians, using miracles to persuade people? It's a question that scholars have debated for centuries. But what's clear is that this encounter was a demonstration of God's power. Elmas, who claimed to have supernatural abilities, is rendered powerless.

So it was a symbolic victory for Paul and Barnabas. And a powerful testimony to Sergius Paulus. The text tells us that Sergius Paulus was astonished by the teaching of the Lord.

So it sounds like he was really impacted by what he saw and heard. Absolutely. So now we've got James martyred, Peter escaping prison, Herod meeting this dramatic end, and now the mission to the Gentiles is officially launched.

It's like every chapter of Acts is full of twists and turns. I can't wait to hear what happens next. Welcome back to our deep dive.

Last time we left Paul and Barnabas in Paphos. After that incredible encounter with the pro consul and that magician. Right.

Elmas bar Jesus. Yeah, him. So where do they go from there? Well, next they set sail for Perga.

It's a major city on the southern coast of Asia Minor. Pardot. And is this where they start preaching to the Gentiles? Not quite yet.

There's a little detour first. Actually, a pretty significant one. John Mark decides to leave the mission and head back home.

Wait, really? John Mark. Barnabas's cousin. The one and only.

Yep. Wow. I wonder why he left.

I mean, they were just getting started. Well, the text doesn't give us all the details. Of course.

Always leaving us hanging. But Dr. Keener offers a few possible explanations. Perga was known for its malaria outbreaks.

Oh, yikes. So maybe John Mark got spooked. Could be.

Or maybe he just wasn't cut out for the hardships of missionary life. You know, the constant travel, the opposition. It wasn't for the faint of heart.

Yeah, I could see that. It definitely takes a certain kind of person to be a missionary. It does.

But even though John Mark left, the mission continued. Paul and Barnabas headed inland. Further into Asia Minor.

That's right. North along the Via Sebasta. Oh, yeah.

That Roman superhighway. Exactly. And their destination, Antioch in Pisidia.

Hold on. Antioch in Pisidia. Didn't we already talk about Antioch? The one in Syria.

We did. It can get a little confusing. But Dr. Keener makes a clear distinction.

Antioch in Pisidia was much smaller. It was a Roman colony, a mix of Roman veterans and the local population. Ah, so a strategic outpost for the Romans.

Exactly. Maintaining order and all that. So why go to this smaller inland city? What was the appeal for Paul and Barnabas? Well, Dr. Keener suggests that maybe Sergius Paulus, the proconsul from Cyprus, gave them some letters of recommendation.

Ah, so they had some connections, some doors already open for them. It's possible. Plus, Antioch in Pisidia was located along a major trade route.

Perfect for spreading the message to a wider audience. Makes sense. They were definitely thinking strategically.

Oh, absolutely. So they arrive in Antioch in Pisidia. And guess what they do first? Head to the synagogue.

Bingo. Sabbath day. They're right there in the synagogue.

And they're actually invited to speak. Wow, so they're welcomed. At first, yes.

Paul gives this incredible sermon, traces God's faithfulness to Israel throughout history, and then he brings it all together, culminating in Jesus as the Messiah. It's amazing how Paul, this former persecutor of Christians, becomes this powerful preacher. Talk about a transformation.

But as Paul's message unfolds, something interesting happens. What's that? A division starts to emerge within the synagogue. Some people are really moved by Paul's words.

They want to hear more. But others, not so much. They got offended.

You could say that. Paul's message was pretty radical for its time. He was proclaiming that salvation was available to everyone.

Not just the Jews. Exactly. Jews and Gentiles alike, through faith in Jesus.

This was a huge challenge to the prevailing Jewish belief that salvation was exclusive to them. Yeah, it really shook things up. It did.

It wasn't just about religious belief. It was about identity, about power structures. If the gospel is true for everyone, then what makes the Jewish people so special? It's understandable why some people would feel threatened by that.

Absolutely. And as the tension rises, Paul and Barnabas make a bold move. They shift their focus to the Gentiles.

Wow. That's a game changer. It is.

It's like they're saying, okay, if you don't want it, we'll take it to those who do. What was the reaction? Well, the Gentiles were overjoyed. This message of inclusion, of hope, it resonated deeply with them.

But many of the Jews rejected the message. They actively opposed Paul and Barnabas. Sometimes it seems like those who claim to know God best are the ones who resist Him the most.

That's a profound observation. Their pride, their sense of self-righteousness, it blinds them to the truth. But for those who are humble, who are open to God's grace.

A gospel offers a completely new way of life. This has been such an incredible journey. It's amazing to see how the early church, despite facing so much persecution, managed to spread the gospel so effectively.

It really is. Their courage, their unwavering faith, it's inspiring. Well said.

And that's what makes these stories so relevant for us today. No matter what challenges we face, we can draw strength from their example. Absolutely.

The message of the gospel is timeless. It's a message of hope, of love, of transformation. It's a message that continues to change lives today, just as it did back then.

And that's something worth reflecting on. How is this message impacting our lives? How are we sharing it with others? Those are great questions to ponder. Well, thank you for joining us on this deep dive into early Christian history.

It's been a privilege to explore these fascinating stories with you. It's been my pleasure. And to our listeners, keep exploring, keep questioning, keep seeking truth.

Until next time.