

Dr. Craig Keener, Acts, Session 16

Podcast Audio Overview

Acts 15-16

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Alright, diving in again today. This time we're taking on Acts chapters 15 and 16 with Dr. Craig Keener as our guide. Buckle up.

Seriously. Church drama. Oh, we got it.

Cultural clashes. You bet. Even some ancient geography thrown in for good measure.

And a demon preaching the gospel. Yeah, we'll tackle that one too. I'm already hooked.

So let's start with this Jerusalem council in Acts 15. Right off the bat, we hit this debate. Is this the same event Paul talks about in Galatians? Okay.

So is this some academic thing or like, does it actually matter for us trying to understand what was going on with the early church? It's important actually. Some folks think; they point to the famine visit, you know, from Acts 11:30. Right.

But Dr. Keener, so with a lot of others on this, he says, no, it lines up with Galatians 2:1-10, same event. So why is that such a big deal? Well, because it kind of shoots down this idea that Acts is just, you know, a cleaned up, made up version of history. Like they're trying to make the early church seem all like perfectly unified when it wasn't.

But if we've got these separate accounts, like Paul's letter, and they're matching up with Acts, that makes Luke's story a lot more believable, historically speaking. It's like having two people backing each other up, right? Exactly. And Dr. Keener even brings up this Occam's razor thing.

Okay. I've heard of that. Like the simplest answer, usually the right one.

Right. No need to come up with extra events when the one we have already fits what we know. So already we're seeing, even in these early days, the church is wrestling with some pretty complex stuff.

Oh yeah. And speaking of complex, even the all-star team of apostles had conflict too. Paul and Barnabas.

Amazing work they did together. But then, bam, snagging the road. And isn't it ironic? It's their strength, their passion, their commitment that ends up driving them apart.

Yeah. It all comes down to John Mark. Ah, John Mark.

The one who bailed on them before, right? Yep. Paul, always thinking practically, is like, nope, not risking that again. Makes sense.

But Barnabas, true to his name, son of encouragement, wants to give Mark another shot. That tension between holding to high standards, but also offering second chances. I mean, I think that's something we all deal with.

Totally. But here's a key thing to remember. Back then, when they wrote biographies showing flaws, that made it more believable.

Not less. Really? So a story with no conflict would actually seem kind of fishy to them. Totally.

We've got to remember not to shy away from the messy human side of history, even, or maybe especially, in the Bible. That's a point. And look, the split between Paul and Barnabas, not ideal, but God clearly blessed both of their paths.

Paul goes on with Silas, and Barnabas takes Mark under his wing again. It's like that saying: when one door closes. Another one opens, exactly.

But hold on, you mentioned Silas's Roman citizenship before. Why bring that up? Might seem small now, but tuck that away for later. Okay, I'm intrigued.

Roman citizenship, check. Now the team gets another member, Timothy. And he's got a fascinating background, right? Timothy is like the poster child for identity struggles back then.

His mom's Jewish, raises him that way. But because of his Gentile dad, he's not circumcised. Stuck between two worlds, Jewish law.

Probably sees him as Gentile. Gentiles. They might think he's too Jewish.

Crazy. So he doesn't fit anywhere. And then Paul decides to circumcise him.

Wait, after all that stuff with the Jerusalem council about circumcision not being necessary for salvation, seems a little contradictory. It was a strategy, plain and simple. He's not changing the gospel message, but he is taking away something that could, you know, trip people up.

Makes them less likely to listen to what he has to say, especially the Jewish communities they're working with. It makes you think about that balance, you know, between being sensitive to different cultures and staying true to what you believe. 100%.

Attention we still deal with today. For sure. And speaking of journeys, their next adventure takes them to Macedonia, but it's not a straight shot.

Paul and his crew run into some roadblocks along the way, right? Closed doors all over the place. So it's like, even when God's guiding you, it's not always this giant flashing arrow pointing the way. Sometimes it's more like figuring out what not to do.

That's a great way to put it. They go through Phrygia, then Myasia, and finally they land in Troas. Okay.

Troas. Major Roman colony. But here's the crazy part.

It's right near where the legendary city of Troy was supposed to be. Wait, THE Troy. Like Trojan horse, Helen of Troy, all that.

We're talking biblical history, and it's Greek myth. That's the one. That's amazing.

And it gets even more symbolic. Paul has this vision, right? Man from Macedonia, begging for help. You can see it as like a flip of that whole ancient invasion story.

Whoa. Instead of armies and conquest, it's the gospel going from Asia to Europe. Peaceful.

Exactly. But even with this clear vision, things don't go smoothly when they get to Macedonia, do they? No. Not at all.

They get beaten, thrown out of Philippi, the very place Paul felt called to go. Just shows following God's plan. Doesn't mean life's going to be easy.

It's more about trusting he's with you through it all, right? Even when things get rough. Exactly. And it's in Philippi they meet this amazing woman, Lydia.

Lydia. Tell me about her. She's a businesswoman, successful, from Thyatira, and she's in the purple dye trade.

Big money back then. Wow. And there are hints that she might have been a freedwoman.

Right. So a former slave who earned her freedom and then made something of herself. That's incredible.

And talk about shattering expectations. A woman running her own business in the ancient world. Totally.

And she offers hospitality to Paul and his group. But didn't we talk about cultural sensitivity earlier? How does that fit in with Lydia? Great point. Having Paul's crew at her place could have raised eyebrows.

People were already suspicious of how they ministered to women. It's a tightrope walk, you know. Between staying true to what you believe and not causing unnecessary trouble.

Still relevant today, I think. Absolutely. And speaking of trouble, things take a sharp turn when they run into this slave girl.

Possessed by a python spirit. That's intense. What does that even mean, python spirit? It's a direct link to the Delphic Oracle, the most famous prophetess in the whole Greco-Roman world.

So we're not talking about just any old demon here. This girl is connected to some seriously deep pagan stuff. So this is like a demon with a VIP pass to the spiritual realm.

Pretty much. But here's the real head-scratcher. This demon, this pythoness, starts announcing Paul's mission.

Hold on. Why would a demon, like, promote the very message it's supposed to be against? It shows you God's power. It works in the craziest way.

Remember we talked about, like, the Star of Bethlehem and God using astrology, a pagan thing, to lead the wise men to Jesus? Right, right. Same idea here. It's like those times when, you know, your enemy accidentally helps you out without even realizing it.

Exactly. And get this, this little encounter. It sets up the whole jailer conversion later on.

Whoa, you're right. It's like a seed that gets planted, and later on, bam, it grows. But of course, this exorcism, it doesn't go unnoticed.

Girls' owners are not happy, are they? They just lost their, like, their moneymaker. Yeah, no more prophetess bringing in the cash. It's a reminder that spirituality, even something sacred like that, can be twisted, you know, used for personal gain.

Sad, but true. Absolutely. So what happens? Paul and Silas, they get hauled in front of the authorities, right? Yep.

Accused of disturbing the peace, promoting foreign customs. The whole nine yards. And I bet the Romans weren't too keen on anyone messing with their power or their gods.

You got it. The magistrates, they're probably more worried about, like, riots and unrest than anything else. So what do they do? Beat Paul and Silas? Throw them in jail? No trial? Nothing.

So much for Roman justice, huh? But Paul and Silas, they don't let a little prison time shut them up. Oh no. They turn that cell into a worship service.

And not just, like, a quiet prayer meeting. What, like a full-blown concert? Full-blown, middle-of-the-night praise session. Singing, prayers, loud enough to shake the whole place.

I wonder what the other prisoners thought was going on. Then bam, an earthquake hits. Yeah, and not just a little tremor.

Prison doors swing open, chains fall off. Total chaos. Wow, talk about divine intervention.

What does the jailer do? He's about to end it all, right? He thinks everyone's escaped and he's going to get blamed. Roman law, super harsh. He'd be done for.

That's terrifying to be in that position. And then Paul, right, even in all that chaos, he stays calm. Shouts out to the jailer, hey, we're all still here.

That's amazing. Even in that crazy situation, he's thinking about someone else. Shows you the power of faith, right? Knowing God's got this, even when everything's falling apart.

So the jailer, he's just seeing the power of God firsthand. His whole world is flipped upside down. And then he asks the question that changes everything.

What must I do to be saved? That's the question, isn't it? The one that's echoed through history. Everyone wants to know how to be saved, how to find their place. Right.

And remember that demon-possessed girl shouting about the way of salvation? Yeah. It all circles back. Maybe the jailer heard her, blew it off at the time.

But now, after the earthquake, seeing Paul and Silas, their faith, those words hit different. Wow. It's crazy how God takes all these separate pieces and puts them together into one big story.

Beautiful, isn't it? So Paul and Silas, they share the good news. And that very night, the jailers and his whole family were baptized. From despair to salvation, all in one night.

Incredible. But hold on. Didn't we talk about Silas's Roman citizenship way back when? Where does that fit in? The next morning, the magistrates are having second thoughts.

They send word to release Paul and Silas. But Paul, he's not one to just let injustice slide. Right.

Especially after that beating. Nope. He's like, hold up, we're Roman citizens, you beat us publicly, no trial, nothing.

We deserve an apology. And they actually apologize. The guys who were so eager to punish him before? Total power shift.

They don't just apologize. They personally escort Paul and Silas out of prison. It's a good reminder that knowing your rights and standing up for yourself matters.

Yeah. Especially when you're being treated unfairly. 100%.

And it shows God can use anything, even something small like Roman citizenship, to do his work. Who would have thought? It's almost funny how a tiny detail becomes this major plot twist. Yeah.

Just shows you God's ways are not our ways, for sure. The whole Philippi episode is full of surprises. A prison becomes a church, a demon tells the truth, and Roman citizenship.

Well, it becomes a tool for justice and a platform for the gospel. It really makes you think, doesn't it? What unexpected ways is God working in our lives right now? What little things, what random encounters might actually be part of his plan? That's the question we should all be asking ourselves. God is in the everyday stuff, the small things, just as much as the big dramatic moments.

It's kind of mind-blowing, right? A Roman prison becomes the start of a church. And a demon. A demon helps a jailer find salvation.

It makes you rethink, you know, where God might be at work. We try to put him in this box, but he's always doing the unexpected. One thing that keeps coming up in these chapters is this idea of God's guidance.

Paul and everyone with him, they're constantly looking for direction. Sometimes it's a dead end, sometimes it's a dream, a vision. And then sometimes it's these totally random encounters, like with that slave girl.

It's like they're on a treasure hunt. With these super cryptic clues, each step just reveals another little piece. And it's not always a smooth ride either.

They get beaten up, thrown in jail, and people are always fighting them. But they keep going, keep trusting that God's got this, even when they can't see the whole picture. That's faith in a nutshell, right? Believing in God's heart, his wisdom, his plan, even when we don't get it.

Yeah, I get that. We're all on this faith journey, and sometimes the path is, well, foggy. But we can choose to trust that God's there, even when we're lost.

These stories show us God can use anyone, anything, to do what he wants. A demon speaks truth, a jail becomes a church, and these regular people, they change the world. So think about it.

What's he doing in our lives today? That's the big question, isn't it? What unexpected things are happening right now in our lives, in our communities, that might be God at work? Maybe it's a conversation we need to have, a relationship that needs fixing, something we should be fighting for, a talent we should be using. It's a challenge, stepping outside our comfort zones, being open to the unexpected, and trusting that God's got it, even when we're clueless. As we wrap up this deep dive into Acts 15 and 16, it just leaves me in awe of God's plan.

It's a story that's still being written, and we all have a role to play. It's like we're all invited to go deeper in our own faith journeys, to look for his guidance, to be ready for adventure, and to trust that he's taking us somewhere amazing. Thanks for joining us on this deep dive.

Keep searching, keep asking questions, and keep believing in the one who holds the whole story. And keep those questions coming. We love hearing what you guys are thinking.

This has been The Deep Dive, and we'll catch you next time for another awesome exploration of God's Word and what he's doing in the world.