

# **Dr. Craig Keener, Acts, Session 17**

## **Podcast Audio Overview**

### **Acts 16-17**

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Welcome back, everyone, for another deep dive. This time we're diving into the world of the Roman Empire. Ah, yeah.

Following the Apostle Paul's journeys through Philippi and Thessalonica. Right. And leading us through this ancient world is a lecture by New Testament scholar Dr. Craig Keener.

Excellent. His insights really bring these biblical accounts to life. Yeah, and I think what's really interesting here is how these two cities, you know, Philippi and Thessalonica.

They each present very different challenges to Paul and his mission. Yeah, let's start with Philippi. Dr. Keener really paints this picture of Philippi as, you know, this proud Roman colony.

Right. Immensely proud of that Roman identity. In fact, he even points out that something like 80% of inscriptions found in Philippi are actually in Latin.

Wow. Even though it's smack dab in the middle of Macedonia. Oh, wow.

Which is like basically Northeast Greece. Yeah. They were serious about being Roman.

That's really interesting because it sets the stage for the legal clash that we see unfold later in the story. You see, the Roman Empire had this kind of a complicated relationship with Judaism at the time. Right.

You know, Emperor Claudius had just expelled the Jewish community from Rome, and this anti-Jewish sentiment was pretty widespread. Yeah, and this is where things get really interesting. Right.

Paul and Silas encounter this slave girl who is possessed by a spirit, and the spirit gives her the ability to tell fortunes. Oh, okay. Now, Paul casts the spirit out of her.

Yeah. Which is certainly a good thing for the girl. Absolutely.

But it throws her owners into a rage. I see. And I guess, you know, they were making a tidy profit off of her ability.

Oh, yeah, of course. But instead of accusing Paul and Silas of, you know, damaging their property. Right.

Which might not have even held up legally. Yeah. They decide to leverage this existing anti-Jewish sentiment in Philippi.

Which is really interesting. It is. They use that Jewish-Roman contrast to their advantage.

Yeah. They drag Paul and Silas before the magistrates, and they accuse them of teaching customs that are unlawful for Romans. Right.

Knowing that this would stir up the crowd and make Paul and Silas look like these dangerous outsiders. It's such a sneaky tactic. Yeah.

And it works because the magistrates, maybe they wanted to appease the crowd. Right. Or maybe they were just out of fear.

Yeah. But they ordered Paul and Silas to be stripped and beaten with rods. Wow.

And thrown in prison. Oh, man. And not just any prison, thrown into the inner prison.

Okay. Which was notorious for its terrible conditions. Yeah.

I mean, prison in those days was not. Dr. Keener really doesn't sugarcoat the brutality of this situation. Right.

You know, the filth, the lack of sanitation. Yeah. The agonizing pain of being locked in stocks.

I can only imagine. I mean, it just makes you wonder: how did they endure such suffering? Well, amidst all of this, you see their faith and their resilience shining through. At midnight, arguably the darkest hour, they begin to sing hymns.

This act of defiance, it's not just an expression of their faith, but it might have even played a role in the incredible event that followed. You're talking about the earthquake, right? Oh, yeah. That is like a total plot twist.

Yeah. So we have this earthquake that is powerful enough to break the prisoner's chains and throw open the prison doors. Right.

But somehow nobody's hurt. Right. It feels like something out of a Hollywood movie.

Earthquakes were often seen as divine interventions in the ancient world. Yeah. The fact that nobody was injured and that the prison didn't crumble suggests that maybe this was more than just a natural disaster.

Yeah. It really had a profound impact on what happened next. I mean, I can only imagine what must have been going through the jailer's mind.

Right. He saw all these doors flung open. Yeah.

It must have been terrifying. He probably thought he was going to be executed for letting the prisoners escape. Well, his reaction really speaks to the severity of Roman law and the fear that it instilled.

Right. But thankfully, Paul intervenes, not only saving the jailer's life, but also opening a door quite literally for an incredible moment of conversion. Yeah.

So shaken to his core, the jailer poses this question that kind of echoes through the ages. Yeah. He asks, what must I do to be saved? What a powerful question.

And their answer is simple, but it's so profound. Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved. That's it.

But then the jailer, along with his entire household, is baptized that very night. I mean, that's not just a personal conversion. No.

That's a transformation of his whole family unit. His whole household. And Dr. Keener points out how risky this act of hospitality was.

Right. Especially considering all the dietary restrictions of the time. Oh, yeah.

You know, the jailer was putting his own safety and reputation on the line by welcoming Paul and Silas. Yeah. And feeding them.

It really makes you think about how faith can inspire such radical acts of courage and generosity. Absolutely. And there's another twist in the story.

The next morning, the magistrates suddenly order Paul and Silas to be released. Really? Yeah. Dr. Keener offers several explanations for this change of heart.

OK. Maybe the earthquake scared them. Yeah.

Perhaps Lydia, that wealthy businesswoman we talked about earlier. Right. She used her influence to secure their release.

OK. Or maybe they just realized that they had overreacted. But there's another layer to this story that makes it even more intriguing.

OK. I'm all ears. What's the twist? Well, it turns out that Paul and Silas are roaming citizens.

A fact they reveal only after being beaten. Wait a minute. Yeah.

They were Roman citizens all along. Why didn't they say something sooner? That's a great question. I mean, wouldn't that have saved them a whole lot of pain? Yeah.

Dr. Keener delves into the possible reasons behind their silence. OK. He suggests that revealing their citizenship earlier might have led to a long and drawn-out trial.

Right. Which would have given their accusers more opportunities to slander them. Yeah.

And, you know, potentially even jeopardize the entire Christian community. Wow. So by waiting until after the beating, they actually turned the tables on these magistrates.

Exactly. Wow. So they basically forced the magistrates to apologize and escort them out of the city.

Yeah. To avoid any further legal trouble. I mean, that is such a bold move.

It really is. It makes you think about how they really understood how to use Roman law to their advantage. Right.

I mean, they clearly weren't preachers. Right. They were savvy operators.

They knew the system. They really knew how to navigate this complex Roman society. Yeah.

It was a calculated risk that ultimately worked in their favor. Yeah. Demonstrating both their shrewdness and their unwavering commitment to spreading the gospel.

Right. But as their journey continues to uptone, Thessalonica will see that their challenges are far from over. OK.

So now let's shift gears and travel with Paul and Silas to Thessalonica. All right. Where they face a whole new set of challenges.

Thessalonica, as Dr. Keener describes, was a completely different beast. Oh, yeah. Compared to Philippi.

Yeah. It was the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia. A bustling port city.

Right. With a diverse population. Yeah.

That could have been as large as 200,000 residents. Huge. That's massive for ancient times.

Yeah. But what's interesting is that Paul initially seems to find some success there. OK.

He preaches in the synagogue for three weeks, maybe even longer. Right. And attracts a diverse group of converts.

OK. Including some influential women. And here again, the role of women is noteworthy.

Yeah. Macedonian women were known for their influence even in political circles. Right.

So their conversion to Christianity would have had a ripple effect. Yeah. Impacting the spread of the new faith in significant ways.

But as we've seen, success often comes with opposition. Yeah. And in Thessalonica, Paul's opponents take a different approach.

Yeah, they do. This time they don't play the anti-Jewish card. Instead, they accuse him of something far more dangerous.

Treason. Exactly. They cleverly twist Paul's message about Jesus being the Messiah, the king.

Right. Into an accusation of proclaiming a rival to Caesar. This was a very serious charge in the Roman Empire, where declaring another king was seen as a direct challenge to the emperor's authority.

So how serious were these accusations of treason in the context of the Roman Empire? They were incredibly serious. Yeah. I mean, remember, proclaiming another king was a big no-no.

Right. A direct affront to the emperor's power. Yeah.

It was considered a capital offense. Right. And could lead to execution.

Oh, wow. And Dr. Keener points out how this charge actually mirrors the accusations that were leveled against Jesus himself, who was ultimately crucified. Right.

For claiming to be king of the Jews. Right. It's this recurring theme in the early church.

You know, this clash between the claims of Christ and the claims of Caesar. So how did the authorities in Thessalonica react to these accusations? It seems like instead of going after Paul directly, they target his host, Jason. Right.

Dr. Keener mentions that Jason's dragged before the city officials, who are referred to as polytarchs. Yeah. A detail that Luke gets right.

Yeah. Which showcases his accuracy as a historian. What's the significance of that little detail? Well, it demonstrates Luke's attention to detail.

Yeah. And his accuracy as a historian. Okay.

The term polytarchs was a specific title that was used for magistrates in Thessalonica. Right. And it's a small but powerful piece of evidence that supports the historical reliability of the book of Acts.

That makes sense. And based on Jason's name. Yeah.

And the fact that he opened his home to Paul. Right. It seems likely that he was Jewish too.

Yeah, probably. So we see again how Paul relied on the hospitality of fellow Jews in these new cities, which sometimes put them at risk. Yes.

And in this case, Jason's forced to post bond for Paul and Silas. Okay. It's a relatively lenient punishment, though, which suggests that maybe the officials didn't take the treason charge all that seriously.

Right. Or perhaps they just wanted to quell the unrest. Yeah.

And avoid a riot. It's almost like they were giving Paul and Silas a warning. Right.

Like a not-so-subtle hint to leave town. Yeah, get out of here. Which is exactly what they do, right? They flee Thessalonica.

They leave. Leaving their new converts behind. Right.

To protect Jason and the fledgling Christian community from further persecution. Imagine having to leave behind everything you worked so hard to build. It's tough.

It really speaks to their commitment to the gospel. Yeah. And their concern for the well-being of their followers.

Their courage is truly inspiring. I mean, they faced constant danger, opposition, even violence, but they remained steadfast in their mission. And as we've seen in these two episodes.

Yeah. They also demonstrated this remarkable ability to adapt to different challenges. Yeah.

Using their understanding of Roman law and social customs to their advantage. Wow. So we've journeyed with Paul through Philippi, where Roman law and a well-timed earthquake play key roles.

And then onto Thessalonica, where accusations of treason forced this hasty exit. Yeah. It's been quite a ride.

It has. What stands out to you as like the most significant takeaway from these two very different experiences? What fascinates me is how these cities really highlight the need for adaptability in spreading the early Christian message. Yeah.

I mean, Paul's core message remained constant. Right. But his approach really shifted depending on the audience.

Yeah. The social and political climate. Right.

You know, in Philippi, his Roman citizenship became a crucial shield. Yeah. But in Thessalonica, he had to rely on the quiet support of new converts and then make a strategic retreat.

It's almost like a masterclass in early Christian missionary work. Yeah. Showcasing the diverse obstacles that they encountered.

Yeah, it really is. I'm especially intrigued by how Paul and Silas use their understanding of Roman law to their advantage in Philippi. Right.

You know, that delayed reveal of their Roman citizenship. That's a brilliant observation. It was such a calculated risk that paid off.

It forced the magistrates into this awkward position. Right. You know, publicly apologizing to avoid this larger legal mess.

Exactly. And I mean, this shrewd tactic likely protected that fledgling Christian community there. It probably did.

It makes you wonder: how did the unique context of each city or region impact the spread of Christianity as a whole? Yeah. It's something to ponder for sure. It's a question worth exploring further.

Yeah. You know, Paul's letters offer additional insights into how he adapted his message for different audiences. Right.

For example, his letter to the Romans really delves into the relationship between faith and the law. Yeah. A theme that was likely shaped by his experiences in places like Philippi.

This deep dive has been incredibly enlightening. It's amazing how Dr. Keener brought these biblical accounts to life. He does a great job.

With his insights into the historical and cultural context. Yeah. It's always a joy to unpack these stories.

Yeah. And discover the layers of meaning woven into them. And for our listeners, we encourage you to delve deeper into the Book of Acts.

Yeah. And that captivating story of early Christianity. Absolutely.

There are countless more adventures to uncover. There are. So stay tuned for our next deep dive where we'll explore another fascinating chapter.

Yeah. In this epic journey of faith. Looking forward to it.

Yeah.