

Dr. Craig Keener, Acts, Session 18

Podcast Audio Overview

Acts 17

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All right, welcome back, everyone. Ready for another deep dive? Oh, always ready to dive in. Perfect. So today we're going way back, ancient Greece, and we're following the Apostle Paul's visit to Athens.

Fascinating stuff, really. It is, and we've got Acts chapter 17 as our main source. Of course.

But we're also going to be weaving in some insights from Dr. Craig Keener. He's got a great lecture on this topic. Oh yeah, Keener, he's always got something insightful to add.

Exactly. Exactly. So picture this: Paul arrives in Athens, and he's ready to share the good news, right? But Athens, man, this was the intellectual hub of the ancient world.

I mean- philosophers everywhere, temples, you name it. Yeah. Not exactly going to be an easy crowd.

It's like, imagine trying to explain, I don't know, maybe like quantum physics to a room full of poets who only speak in rhymes, you know, totally different ways of seeing the world. I love that analogy. And you can really see that tension play out in Acts.

Oh yeah, for sure. From the moment Paul sets foot in Athens to that famous speech he gives at the Areopagus. Oh yeah, yeah, the Areopagus.

Which was like their version of a high court. A place for big debates and, you know, important decisions. Okay.

So before we get to the speech, though, something that really struck me was how Paul even ends up in Athens. Acts 17:1 and 10. It mentions he takes this detour to Berea.

Oh! Basically to avoid some trouble brewing back in Thessalonica. Yeah, got to be strategic. It makes you realize, even back then, people were using travel routes and communication networks in really clever ways.

Well, yeah. I mean, Paul, he was always on the move. Right.

Always thinking a few steps ahead. Yeah. And I think that's part of what made him so effective.

Yeah. And you know, speaking of effective, it's so interesting to compare Berea with Thessalonica. Oh yeah.

In Thessalonica, Paul faces all this hostility, right? But Berea, it's described in Acts as this place where people are actually open to hearing him out. Right. And not just hearing him out, they're examining the scriptures every day.

Right. To see if what Paul was saying actually lined up with what they knew to be true. It shows you the intellectual climate of the time.

People were engaged. Yeah. They valued evidence, and they weren't afraid to challenge ideas.

It's like they were fact-checking Paul in real time. Exactly. That must have made for some pretty lively discussion.

Oh, absolutely. And you know, this kind of inquisitive spirit, it really sets the stage for Paul's encounter with the Athenian philosophers. Okay.

So now we're in Athens. The heart of philosophy. Right.

Paul arrives, and he's immediately hit by, well... It's a city full of idols everywhere you look. Yeah. Yeah.

Acts 17:16 says his spirit was stirred by the sheer number of gods they were worshiping. It would be overwhelming. But to understand the dynamics here, we have to remember that in Roman times.

It's a bit different than how we might think of it today. Okay. So what do you mean? Well, philosophy and religion were seen quite differently back then.

Right. I mean, philosophy was more about ethics, about living a good life, you know, figuring out the best way to be human. Okay.

While religion, it was much more about rituals. Okay. And pleasing the gods, making sure they didn't get angry with you.

Oh, interesting. This is very specific context that Paul's stepping into when he encounters two main philosophical schools, the Epicureans and the Stoics. The Stoics, right.

Yeah. Big players in the philosophical world back then. And Acts 17:17 describes them engaging Paul in debate.

Oh, yeah. They loved a good debate. So let's break this down a bit.

Who were these philosophical heavyweights? And what made their ideas so different from what Paul was trying to share? Well, let's start with the Epicureans. Okay. They were all about pursuing pleasure.

Pleasure. But, and this is important, not pleasure in the way we typically think about it. Okay.

For them, pleasure meant the absence of pain. Okay. Both physical and mental.

Interesting. So they were very skeptical of the traditional gods, and they believed that when you die, that's it. Wow.

Wow. A pretty bleak outlook. Yeah.

Not exactly a recipe for joy and celebration. I can see why they might not have been lining up to join Paul's movement. Right.

So if that's the Epicureans, what about the Stoics? Well, the Stoics were a different breed altogether. I mean, they were all about virtue. They believed in this thing called the Logos, this kind of universal reason that ordered the universe, and they saw God as this all-pervading force that connected everything.

Interesting. And in a way, there are some interesting parallels between their ideas and certain aspects of Christian thought. Parallels.

Yeah. But also- Nemesis. Yeah.

I mean, Paul's message about a personal God. Right. About sin and salvation.

About the resurrection. Yeah. This was all very neat of them.

It would have clashed pretty dramatically with both the Epicurean and the Stoic views. Oh, absolutely. A real clash of worldviews.

And this is where things get really interesting. So, imagine these philosophers, intrigued by Paul, but also skeptical, and they decide, all right, let's bring this guy before the Areopagus. Oh, yeah.

Put him to the test. Which was like, you know, a high court, but also a place for intellectual debate. It's like their grand stage for ideas.

Exactly. And Dr. Keener, he suggests that this scene in Acts 17:1 to 21, it's intentionally echoing the trial of Socrates- oh, wow. Who was condemned by the Areopagus centuries earlier for challenging Athenian beliefs.

Right. Introducing new gods. It's as if Luke, the author of Acts, is setting Paul up as this new Socrates.

Yeah, someone who's going to shake things up. Shake things up, yeah. And force people to confront some really uncomfortable truths.

Whoa. Okay. It's a powerful parallel.

It is. And that's a great place to pause for now. Okay.

So, everyone listening, join us next time as we unpack Paul's speech at the Areopagus. It's going to be good. Oh, yeah.

You don't want to miss this. All right. See you next time.

See you then. Okay. So, last time, we left Paul standing before the Areopagus.

Oh, yeah. Tough crowd. This council of, like, you know, the best and brightest minds in Athens, and he's got to figure out how to connect with these guys.

Right. How to get through to them. Acts 17:22, 23, it sets the scene, and it's clear Paul, he's not just going to, like, you know, launch into a theological lecture.

No. He's smarter than that. He starts by observing how religious the Athenians are.

Oh, yeah. Even pointing out an altar they've dedicated to an unknown god. What a brilliant move.

Right. He's finding that common ground. Yeah.

You know, acknowledging their beliefs, their practices. Yeah. It's like he's saying, hey, I see you guys.

You're searching. You're open to the possibility that there might be gods out there that you don't even know about yet. And this wasn't just some rhetorical trick, right? No.

Not at all. Dr. Keener points out that these altars were to unknown gods. Oh, yeah.

They were real. They were a real thing. Yeah.

The Athenians, they took their gods seriously. Wait. So they had altars to gods they didn't even know.

There's this story. It's about a plague that hit the city. Okay.

And they sacrificed to all their known gods, but nothing worked. So they got desperate, and they offered this sacrifice to an unknown god just in case... Just in case they missed one. Exactly.

Yeah. They wanted to cover all their bases. That's fascinating.

It shows you how much they wanted to appease any potential divine power. So Paul, he taps into this existing belief. Yeah.

This openness to the unknown. But he doesn't stop there, of course. No.

He's just getting started. Right. He transitions into talking about God's self-sufficiency.

This is where things get really interesting. And this might have resonated with both Jewish thought and maybe even some aspects of Stoicism. Possibly, yeah.

He's arguing that God doesn't need our temples, our sacrifices. For the Athenians, that would have been a pretty radical idea. Yeah.

They were all about those elaborate rituals. Oh, totally. And offerings.

But Paul, he's coming in with a different perspective. He's saying that God is the creator of everything. He doesn't need to live in a temple built by human hands.

Right. In Acts 17:24-25 and Isaiah 66:1, both emphasize that point. God is not confined by physical spaces.

He's not dependent on our offerings. It's a huge shift in thinking. Yeah.

It's like Paul is challenging their full understanding of how we relate to the divine. No more trying to appease the gods. Right.

No more striving to earn their favor. Instead, he's presenting this God who is beyond our control. Yeah.

We can't manipulate him. OK. So that leads to the next crucial point in Paul's speech, which is humanity's dependence on God.

Right. The flip side of the coin. Acts 17:26-29. This is where it gets really interesting.

OK. Tell me more. Paul, he's emphasizing that God, he's not just the creator.

He's also the sustainer. Yeah. Of all life.

We depend on him for everything. Whether we realize it or not. It's a fundamental truth about our existence.

And get this. To drive his point home, Paul quotes their own poets. No way.

Epimenides, Aratus. Wow. He did his research.

Yeah. These well-known figures in Greek culture. What a brilliant way to connect with his audience.

Right. He's meeting them where they are. It's like a master class in contextualization.

He's not rejecting their culture outright. He's showing them how some of their own cherished ideas can actually point towards the God he's proclaiming. He's weaving biblical truths into their worldview.

Exactly. He's building bridges instead of walls. OK.

But Paul, he doesn't shy away from the more challenging parts of the gospel, does he? No, he doesn't. He brings up the call to repentance, the coming judgment. The stakes are high.

Through a man God has appointed. This is where the cultural divide becomes really apparent. Yeah.

You can imagine the Epicureans. They believed death was the end. Right.

They wouldn't have been too thrilled about this whole judgment thing. Not at all. And the Stoics, while they believed in some kind of cosmic justice.

It wasn't the same as what Paul was talking about. Right. This emphasis on personal accountability.

And a future reckoning. So what does Paul do? How does he navigate this tension? Well, he saves the most radical, the most controversial element for last. Shit.

The resurrection of Jesus. Acts 17:32 describes the reaction. Mockery.

Disbelief. Makes sense. It was just too much for some of them to handle.

It seems kind of counterintuitive, right? Like you'd think that would be the attention-grabbing part. You'd think so, wouldn't you? Why wait till the end? Well, Dr. Keener has this interesting take on it. OK.

He suggests that Paul was building up to this point, you know? The resurrection, it was so foreign to their way of thinking. So inconceivable. Yeah.

He needed to first lay some groundwork. Establish some common ground. Get them thinking in a new way.

It's like he's carefully constructing an argument. Brick by brick. Knowing that if he drops this bomb too soon.

They're just going to shut down. Right. They won't be ready for it.

Exactly. So even though the reaction was mixed- some scoffing, some intrigued. It's amazing to think that despite all these barriers, intellectual opposition, Paul's message, it actually found fertile ground.

It did. Acts 17.34 tells us that Dionysius was a member of the Areopagus. Wow.

A member of the council. And a woman named Damaris, they believed. So even in this heart of skepticism.

The power of the gospel breaks through. The power of the Holy Spirit at work. It's a powerful reminder that God works in ways we don't always understand.

He doesn't always follow our script. Right. And it's a testament to Paul's boldness, his sensitivity to the context.

He adapted his approach. But he never compromised the message. Never.

Okay. So Paul wraps up his time in Athens, and Acts 18:1 tells us he moves on to Corinth. On to the next adventure.

But before we follow him there. Yeah. Something's been bugging me.

Oh, what's that? Some people, they question whether Paul actually had any success in Athens. Really? They point to 1 Corinthians 16:15 where Paul refers to someone in Corinth as the first fruits of Achaia. Right.

And since Athens was technically part of Achaia, they say, well, that means Paul didn't make any converts in Athens. I see the argument. It's a bit of a head scratcher.

Well, Dr. Keener addresses this directly in his lecture. Oh, good. He explains that Athens was a free city, meaning it wasn't officially considered part of the Roman province of Achaia.

So that first fruits reference? It doesn't actually contradict the conversions mentioned in Acts. So it's more of a technicality than a contradiction. Exactly.

Okay. That makes sense. And you know what's fascinating? Even if those conversions hadn't happened, Paul's visit to Athens is still incredibly significant.

How so? It shows us the importance of engaging with different worldviews, of seeking that common ground, of tailoring our approach without compromising the truth. He could have just dismissed the Athenians. As too intellectual, too set in their ways.

Yeah, but he didn't. He stepped into their world, found ways to connect their beliefs to the God he was proclaiming. It really makes you think, doesn't it? How often do we shy away from conversations about faith? You know? Oh yeah, all the time.

Because we just assume, like, oh, this person's too different. Too set in their ways. They'll never understand.

Yeah. It's easy to write people off. But Paul's example in Athens gives us this framework.

A way to engage. Yeah. Thoughtfully.

Respectfully. Even when the gap between worldviews seems huge. Okay.

So, key takeaways here. What can we learn from Paul? Yeah. What can we glean from his experience that might actually be relevant to our lives today? Because, let's face it, the world can be pretty resistant to these ideas.

Yeah. Even hostile sometimes. To faith.

To the gospel. So, what stands out to you? Well, one thing that really strikes me is the importance of listening. Really listening.

Trying to understand where the other person is coming from. It's not about just waiting for your turn to talk. No, it's about actually hearing them.

Yeah. Paul, he didn't just lecture the Athenians. He engaged with their ideas.

Acknowledged their search for truth. Tried to find those points of connection. Between their beliefs and the gospel message.

Which is not always easy. No, it's hard work. But it's worth it.

It reminds me of that saying: people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. That's so true. And Paul, he genuinely cared about the Athenians.

And that comes through in his approach. Yeah, it's palpable. So, building on that, I think another key takeaway is the power of finding common ground.

And it doesn't mean we have to compromise our beliefs. Right. But it does mean looking for those shared values.

Yeah, like what makes us human. Those universal human longings. Yeah, that can bridge the gap.

Between different perspectives. Like Paul using that altar to the unknown God as a starting point. Oh, that's such a good example.

It allowed him to affirm their sense of searching, you know, while also introducing them to this God. Who transcends their understanding. Yeah, who's bigger than anything they could imagine.

It's a reminder that sometimes the best way to talk about our faith isn't through these forceful arguments or theological jargon. Yeah. You know.

It can be alienating. It can be, yeah. But through genuine curiosity.

Asking questions. Being willing to meet people where they are. It's about building those bridges, like you said.

Yeah, instead of putting up walls. Creating space for dialogue. Even if we disagree.

Because disagreement is okay. It's part of the process. Exactly.

Okay, so I think this leads to what might be the most important takeaway of all. Which is? Humility. Oh, yeah.

That's huge. Paul was bold in proclaiming the gospel, but he was also humble enough to admit. That he didn't have all the answers.

Right. He was willing to learn from the Athenians. To engage with their ideas.

And to trust that the Holy Spirit. Do the heavy lifting. Yeah.

It's not all on us. We can't force anyone to believe. Right.

We just plant the seeds. And water them. And trust that God will bring the growth.

It's a beautiful thing. It is. So, as we wrap up our deep dive into Paul's Athenian adventure.

It's been quite a journey. It has. And I'm left with this question.

What are the altars to unknown gods in my own life? Ooh, that's a good one. In my community. In the people I encounter every day.

Where are people searching? Yeah. Where are they wrestling with big questions? And how can we, like Paul. Approach those encounters with humility.

Curiosity. Genuine care. It's a challenge.

It is. But it's also an incredible opportunity. To really embody the gospel.

In a world that needs it. Yeah. That desperately needs to see its transforming power.

Well said. All right, everyone. Thanks for joining us on this deep dive.

It's been a pleasure. We'll see you next time for another adventure through the scriptures. Until then.