

Dr. Craig Keener, Acts, Session 19

Podcast Audio Overview

Acts 18

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Welcome back, everybody, to another deep dive, and today we're going to be taking a look at the Apostle Paul in Corinth. Ooh, Corinth. Yeah.

So this will be interesting. Very interesting. We're going to be using some excerpts from a lecture by Dr. Craig Keener.

Excellent. And he really does a good job of bringing this period to life. Yeah.

The thing about Paul in Corinth that's so fascinating is how different Corinth was from, say, Jerusalem. Okay. It was a bustling Roman colony, a major port city right there on the Isthmus.

So it's a really important spot. Oh, yeah. Extremely important spot.

That's a trade going on there. You got it. Yeah.

The mixing of cultures. It would have been amazing to see. It kind of sounds like New York City in a way.

Yeah. You could say that. Yeah.

It's a good analogy. No, I was reading through my notes before we started this, and Corinth had a little bit of a reputation. Oh, yeah.

Not exactly known for being the most wholesome place. Yeah. The city had a certain vibe to it.

There was a saying: not for every person is the voyage to Corinth. Oh, really? Yeah. Almost like a warning.

And the verb to Corinthianize didn't mean going to art museums. Okay. So we're talking about a city known for its, shall we say, indulgences.

Yeah. All right. So let's draw Paul right smack in the middle of that.

He's this devout Jewish follower of Jesus, and now he's in Corinth. I can see why Dr. Keener calls this a culture clash. Oh, absolutely.

It's a huge culture clash to really grasp Paul's experience here. Right. Both his successes and his struggles.

We really need to understand that context. Okay. Well, the lecture kind of jumps right into this chance meeting that Paul has with a couple, and it seems like this meeting is huge for his entire mission there in Corinth.

It really is. So can you tell us about Aquila and Priscilla? Oh, yeah. They're a fascinating couple.

Jewish like Paul, but they had just been expelled from Rome by Emperor Claudius. That's pretty serious. What was going on there? Well, Dr. Keener brings up this Roman historian named Suetonius.

And Suetonius wrote about Claudius kicking out the Jews because of this unrest caused by someone named Christus. That sounds awfully close to Christus, like Jesus Christ. And that's exactly what most scholars think happened.

They think that Romans just got the name wrong. But that this expulsion really might have been linked to early Christians already stirring things up in Rome. So Aquila and Priscilla, they just got caught in the crossfire and ended up right in Paul's path.

Talk about historical dominoes falling into place. So this wasn't just a quick encounter, right? No. They became pretty key players in the early church.

Oh, yeah, absolutely. They worked alongside Paul. They even hosted a house church, likely right there in their home.

So this wasn't just a chance. This was really pivotal for spreading the Christian message in Corinth. So we've got Paul in this wild city.

He connects with these incredible partners. But the lecture also mentions that Paul had a day job. He did.

He was a tent maker. That's right. So he wasn't just preaching.

He was working with his hands. What's the significance of that? Well, it's really crucial for understanding the social dynamics that Paul was navigating. Okay.

See, back then, manual labor wasn't exactly respected among the elite. I see. So imagine trying to win over a sophisticated Corinthian while smelling like leather and dye.

Yeah, that's not a good look. Not a good look. So even though Paul is this brilliant theologian, his job might have been a barrier.

Oh, yeah, sure. For him, connecting with some people. Yeah.

And think about where he'd be working in the ancient marketplace. Oh, right. Dr. Kuehner describes it as this vibrant hub of activity.

Yeah. Just constant bargaining and trade guilds and conversations everywhere. So it almost sounds like a social media platform, but in real life.

Yeah. Like a constant exchange of news and ideas. Exactly.

And for Paul, this wasn't just earning a living. Right. This was an opportunity.

I see. He could interact with people from all walks of life, share his beliefs in a very organic way. So I'm starting to see how Paul's background really shaped his approach to ministry.

It did. But let's not forget the religious context here. Corinth was a pagan city.

Through and through. Temples everywhere. Statues, dedications to all sorts of gods and goddesses.

Dr. Kuehner really paints a vivid picture of this multi-religious environment. So how did Paul's message of one God and Jesus as the Messiah land in a place like that? Right. I mean, was it a tough sell? Well, he started at the Jewish synagogue, which makes sense given his roots.

But he faced some pushback there. So he shifted his teaching next door to the House of Titius Justice. So that's the birth of the house church? Yeah.

Was that common back then? It became a defining characteristic of early Christianity. Really? Yeah. Think about it.

No fancy buildings. Right. No established institutions.

Just gathering in homes to share their faith. Wow. That's pretty remarkable when you think about it.

It is. So what was it like inside one of these early house churches? Well, picture a typical Roman home. Okay.

You'd have the atrium, a central open space, maybe the triclinium, a dining area where people reclined. Okay. These spaces could hold a decent number of people, depending on the home size.

So a much more intimate setting than a grand temple. Yeah. I can see the appeal in a city as chaotic as Corinth.

Yeah. But intimate doesn't necessarily mean peaceful. Right? I mean- I'm guessing this is where the opposition that Paul faced really heats up.

You're right. Things escalate, leading to Paul being hauled before the Roman pro-consul of Achaia, a man named Gallio. Okay.

Gallio. That name rings a bell. He was known for his wit, right? He was.

Some kind of sharp legal mind. Yeah. And his presence in Corinth is fantastic for historians.

Oh. It lets us pinpoint when all this was happening with remarkable accuracy. So this isn't just some vague biblical story.

We're talking real history unfolding here. Real history. But what was it like for Paul to be brought before this powerful Roman official? Yeah.

What was the scene? Okay. So picture this. The bustling form of Corinth and dominating the whole marketplace is the Bema.

Okay. This massive platform, the largest tribunal in the Roman Empire. Wow.

A symbol of Roman power. Okay. So this wasn't some quiet backroom meeting.

No. Paul's on trial in front of the whole city. You got it.

So what happens next? Well, that's a story for part two of our deep dive. All right. So we'll leave our listeners hanging on that cliffhanger.

Yes, we will. We'll unpack the trial, what Paul was accused of, and how Gallio, with his famous wit, handled the whole situation. Sounds good to me.

All right. So we'll see you in part two. Looking forward to it.

Okay. So we're back in ancient Corinth, and the tension is palpable. I mean, Paul is standing there before Gallio, the Roman proconsul at the Bema.

I can just imagine all the whispers in the crowd. And this is where it gets really interesting, because this trial, as described in Acts 18, it gives us this window into how Roman law and society actually worked. Oh, okay.

So Paul's accusers, they were probably the people that he clashed with at the synagogue. Yeah. They bring their charges against him.

Okay. So what were they actually accusing Paul of? Well, Dr. Keener believes the charges probably centered around his preaching about Jesus as the Messiah. Yeah.

Right. Now, to them, this could have been seen as disrupting the peace, promoting an illegal religion. Yeah.

Maybe even blasphemy against the Roman gods. Oh, wow. So not a light accusation in a Roman colony.

No, not at all. I mean, Paul could be in some serious trouble. For sure.

So how does Galio, this famous witty official, how does he handle this? Well, he's pretty clever about it. Okay. He quickly dismisses the case.

Oh, really? Yeah. He sees it as this internal Jewish squabble. Not really something for Roman courts to get involved in.

So he's basically like, not my jurisdiction. Yeah, essentially. Okay.

He states that if it were a matter of actual wrongdoing, a crime, then he'd hear them out. But this is about their law, their Messiah, their internal stuff, not Rome's problem. I mean, that's pretty savvy.

He sidesteps a religious debate and asserts Roman authority. Exactly. Without resorting to force, I bet Paul was relieved.

Oh, for sure. It was a significant victory for him. This ruling basically allowed Paul to continue preaching in Corinth.

Okay. At least for now, without that legal threat hanging over him. So crisis averted, but this whole encounter with Gallio, it makes me wonder, what does this tell us about how early Christians were viewed by Roman authorities? That's a really good question.

It reveals that Christians were often seen as kind of suspicious. Right. Outsiders.

Their beliefs were strange-a-cold, disruptive, potentially even dangerous to Roman order. Right. We have to remember that they weren't just preaching a new religion.

No. They were challenging deeply ingrained cultural and political norms. You got it.

And this trial before Gallio really highlights that tension. Right. But it also shows us that Roman officials weren't always like gung-ho about persecuting Christians.

Okay. Sometimes they were indifferent, like in this case. Yeah.

Or they even found these religious disputes amusing. So it wasn't a black-and-white relationship. Not always hostile, but definitely full of challenges.

Exactly. Okay. So we've covered Paul's arrival, his partners, his work, and this really dramatic trial.

What else does Dr. Keener highlight about Paul's time in this kind of crazy city? Well, he dives into the complexities of Paul preaching in such a diverse and pagan environment. Right. Imagine this culture clash between Paul's monotheistic message and the polytheistic beliefs that were just woven into every part of Corinthian life.

Yeah. It's hard for us to really grasp how prevalent those pagan beliefs were back then. It's true.

Just think about it. Public statues. Right.

Household shrines, festivals, everyday rituals. The gods were everywhere. Right.

It wasn't just religion. It was cultural identity, social status, even tied to their economy. Wow.

So how did Paul even begin to approach this? I mean, did he try to like adapt his message to make it more palatable? Well, based on his letters, it seems that he addressed idolatry head-on. Wow. Okay.

He challenged the Corinthians to reject these false gods. Right. And embrace the one true God.

Okay. The God of Israel revealed through Jesus Christ. Now that had to be a radical message in a city like Corinth.

Oh, yeah. Yeah, it was. So did it gain any traction? Did people actually convert? Well, the lecture mentions Crispus.

Oh, yeah. Who was a synagogue leader. Okay.

He converted to Christianity and was baptized by Paul. Okay. So clearly at least some in the Jewish community were receptive.

That's encouraging. But what about the non-Jewish population? How did they respond to Paul's message? Well, remember, Paul's work as a tent maker. Right.

Dr. Keener highlights how that probably connected him with a wide range of people. Oh, okay. Including those involved in trade and commerce.

Right. And with Corinth being this major port. Yeah.

He'd be meeting travelers, merchants, people from all over the Roman Empire. So his marketplace interactions were almost a form of ministry in themselves. Yeah.

You could say that. And the lecture also points out that some of the names mentioned in Paul's letters to the Corinthians. Okay.

They hint that he was making inroads with the Roman population, too. So it's amazing to see how the Christian message, despite the challenges, was taking root in Corinth. It was.

Spreading beyond the Jewish community. Yeah. And reaching these diverse groups.

For sure. But I have a feeling that this growth wasn't without its issues. You're right.

The lecture mentions that Paul faced opposition, not just from those outside the church. Oh. But also from within.

Wait, so you mean conflict within the early Christian community itself? Oh, wow. Paul's letters to the Corinthians address all sorts of issues. Like what? Divisions, immorality, disputes over spiritual gifts.

Wow. Even questions about the resurrection. So it wasn't all like harmony and unity.

Not always. In those house churches. Right.

I mean, they were dealing with some pretty heavy stuff. Oh, yeah. Theological and ethical dilemmas.

Wow. And these challenges remind us that the early church, while inspired by the Holy Spirit, was still made up of human beings. Right.

With their flaws, their biases, and their disagreements. Yeah, just like any community. Exactly.

It's a good reminder that following Jesus doesn't instantly make us perfect. Right. We still grapple with our differences, and we try to live out our faith in these really tough situations.

That's true. And that's a theme that's woven throughout all of Paul's letters. Okay.

He's constantly urging the Corinthians to love one another, forgive each other. Right. And live in a way that reflects the gospel they profess.

A message that's just as relevant today as it was back then. Absolutely. Speaking of messages, the lecture mentions a pretty remarkable one that Paul receives while in Corinth.

Okay. A vision from the Lord himself. Yes.

And it's a powerful example of God encouraging and guiding his people, even amidst difficulty. Okay. I'm intrigued by what happened in this vision.

Why did Paul need this kind of encouragement? Well, remember all that opposition he was facing. Right. From both Jews and Gentiles.

Right. He's working long hours. Yeah.

Dealing with these conflicts within the church itself. Yeah. I mean, it's easy to imagine him feeling discouraged.

Right. Maybe even tempted to just pack it all in. Right.

So this vision was a reminder that he wasn't alone. Exactly. That God was with him.

Yeah. And his work was important. It was.

So what exactly did the Lord say to Paul? Well, it was simple, yet powerful. Okay. Dr. Keener describes it as this classic biblical vision.

Okay. With Jesus appearing to Paul. Right.

And saying, don't be afraid, keep on speaking, do not be silent. Wow. Straight to the point.

Right. That must have been incredibly reassuring for Paul. Absolutely.

And that message, don't be afraid, keep speaking. Yeah. I mean, it speaks to us too.

Yeah. Especially when we face challenges to our own faith. Right.

Or we feel pressure to stay silent about what we believe. It does resonate. But honestly, it's hard to know when to speak up and when to stay silent.

That's true. How do we navigate that tension? That's a question worth pondering. And it's something we'll continue exploring as we dig deeper into Paul's time in Corinth.

Okay. Because even with this divine reassurance, Paul's ministry is about to take a turn. Okay.

Leading him on a new journey. Okay. So here we are, back for the final part of our deep dive into Paul's time in Corinth.

And we've seen him face down some serious opposition, navigate a very tricky trial, and wrestle with some really complex issues inside the early church. Right. But even after all that, he receives this powerful vision from the Lord.

Right. Telling him to stay put. Yeah.

There's more work to do in Corinth. It really is kind of counterintuitive. Yeah.

You'd think after all that conflict, Paul might be ready to just get out of there. Totally. But Dr. Keener points out that this vision really underscores something crucial about Paul's ministry.

Okay. What's that? His unwavering commitment to sharing the Christian message. Okay.

Even in places that seemed resistant or even hostile to it. So it wasn't about seeking comfort or popularity. It was about obedience and following God's call no matter where it led.

And I wonder if there are any parallels for us today. Oh, for sure. In terms of where we're called to be and the work we're called to do.

Absolutely. Yeah. I think this vision challenges us to think about the places and situations where God might be calling us to stay.

Okay. Not because they're easy or comfortable. Right.

But because there's something important for us to do there. It's that tension, isn't it? Yeah. Between wanting to be where we feel accepted and safe.

Right. And being where we can truly make a difference. It's a real struggle.

Yeah. And it's interesting how Paul's experience in Corinth highlights that struggle. Yeah.

It's a human struggle. Right. And Paul, even as this like towering figure in early Christianity.

Yeah. He wasn't immune to it. Right.

But his time in Corinth really is a testament to the transformative power of faithfulness. It is. Even when it's hard.

Absolutely. So Paul stays in Corinth. He does.

Trusting in God's vision and pressing on with his ministry. Yeah. But his story doesn't end there, does it? It does not.

What happens next? Well, Dr. Keener tells us that after spending a significant amount of time in Corinth. Okay. Probably around 18 months.

Wow. That's a long time. Yeah.

He eventually decides it's time to move on. Okay. He sets sail for Syria.

Okay. But first he makes a stop in Cenchrea.

Yeah. It's a port near Corinth. Okay.

To fulfill a vow that he had taken. I'm curious about these vows. What kind of vow would Paul have taken? And why was it so important to fulfill it? Well, it's not totally clear from the text what the specific vow was.

But some scholars think it might have been a Nazirite vow. Okay. Which involved abstaining from certain things like cutting your hair.

Oh, okay. Others suggest that it could have been a more general vow of dedication to God. Okay.

But regardless, in that culture, fulfilling a vow was incredibly important. Right. It was a sign of faithfulness and integrity.

So Paul, even as he's planning this new journey, he's still making sure to honor his commitments. Yeah. It really speaks to his character and who's accompanying him on this trip.

Well, he's joined by Priscilla and Aquila. Oh, wow. Who decided to travel with him.

It's amazing how that chance meeting back in Corinth turned into this deep and lasting partnership. It really highlights the power of community, especially in ministry. Absolutely.

Paul wasn't doing this alone. Right. He had these incredible companions sharing the burdens, offering support.

Yeah. And it makes me think about the people that support my own faith journey. Right.

And the ways that I can offer support to others. Those are great things to reflect on. And that theme of partnership.

Yeah. It continues as Paul and his companions continue their travels. Okay.

They make a stop in Ephesus. Ephesus. Yeah.

Where Aquila and Priscilla decide to stay. Oh, wow. And Paul continues on to Jerusalem.

So it's like Paul is planting these seeds everywhere he goes. Yeah. Leaving behind people who will carry on this work.

Right. Of spreading the Christian message. Exactly.

It's like this ripple effect spreading outward from Jerusalem. It really is. And Ephesus, where Aquila and Priscilla settle.

Yeah. That becomes a vital center of early Christianity. It does.

Thanks in part to their ministry there. Right. It's amazing to see how those connections, those seemingly chance encounters.

Yeah. Can really shape the course of history. It really can.

Well, we've covered a lot of ground in this deep dive. We have. Paul's arrival in Corinth.

His work as a tent maker. The challenges that he faced. The development of the house church.

That dramatic trial before Gallio. The encouraging vision from the Lord. Right.

And the start of new journeys. It's been quite a journey. It really has.

And through it all. Yeah. We see this central theme emerge.

What's that? This remarkable growth and resilience of the early Christian church. Yeah. Despite all this opposition, persecution, and internal conflicts.

Right. The message of Jesus Christ kept spreading. It did.

Changing lives and shaping the world. Powerful stuff. It really is a truly inspiring story and one that I think challenges us to reflect on how we live out our own faith today.

Absolutely. What does it mean for us to be followers of Jesus in a culture that can be indifferent or even hostile to what we believe? It's a big question. I think Paul's time in Corinth offers some guidance.

He reminds us that faithfulness isn't always easy. Right. That community is essential.

Right. And that sometimes God calls us to stay put in difficult places. Yeah.

Because there's important work to be done. And sometimes that work is simply about living out our faith with integrity and love even when it's hard. Yeah.

And trusting that our actions will have a ripple effect. Right. That we may never fully see.

Beautifully said. Well, this has been a fascinating deep dive into Paul's time in Corinth. We've uncovered some historical insights and explored the cultural context.

Yeah. And glimpsed the personal challenges that Paul faced for those who want to delve even deeper. I highly recommend checking out the full lecture by Dr. Craig Keener.

Yeah. He's a great resource. He really brings this period to life.

And for those who are intrigued by Paul's work as a tentmaker. Right. The scholarship of Ronald Hack is a great place to start.

A great place to start. Until next time, keep exploring, keep questioning, and keep diving deep into this fascinating world of history, culture, and faith. Thanks for joining us on this deep dive.

It's been a pleasure.