

Dr. Craig Keener, Acts, Session 20

Podcast Audio Overview

Acts 18-20

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Alright, let's jump into another deep dive. This time we're walking with Paul through Acts chapters 18 through 20. We're using the lectures from Dr. Craig Keener to unpack some really cool stuff.

We've got legal battles, ancient economics, and even a bit of magic. Yeah, this section of Acts is wild. Paul's facing all these complicated situations.

It's amazing how he managed to come out on top. He's like some kind of ancient legal ninja. Right, like in Corinth, things were getting really tense between the early Christians and the Jewish community.

How did Paul avoid getting totally shut down there? Okay, so picture this. Rome had this system called *religio licita*, which basically gave special legal status to certain religions. Judaism had that status, and Paul super cleverly used it to his advantage.

He's like, hold on, we're not some brand new cult here. We're part of this old established religion. Ah, so he's framing Christianity as an offshoot of Judaism to gain some legal protection.

That's smart. But his opponents weren't buying it, right? They tried to paint Christianity as a threat to Roman order. What happened when they dragged Paul before Gallio, the Roman pro-consul? Oh, Gallio wanted nothing to do with their religious squabbles.

He basically threw up his hands and said, look, this is your Jewish drama, not mine. Figure it out yourselves. Wow, talk about dismissing a case.

But this ruling was huge for the early church, wasn't it? Absolutely. It set a legal precedent saying that Christianity, at least for now, was protected under Roman law as part of Judaism. That's a major win for Paul.

But there's this curious detail about Sosthenes, the guy who accused Paul. He ends up getting beaten, but then later, surprise, he shows up as a co-sender of one of Paul's letters. I know, right? What's up with that? Did that beating somehow lead him to become a believer? Or is Luke, the author of Acts, just messing with us, making us think about the different ways people reacted to Paul's message? It's one of those fascinating little mysteries that makes you want to dig deeper.

Okay, so speaking of fascinating people, let's talk about Apollos. This guy is an eloquent follower of John the Baptist, totally on fire for God, but he's missing some crucial details about Jesus. Now, he doesn't get re-baptized like some other disciples of John.

Why the difference? The key here is the Holy Spirit. Think of it like this. Apollo's already had the engine running.

He just needed a little GPS update on who Jesus was. The other disciples, they needed both the engine and the map, so re-baptism was necessary. So for early Christians, receiving the Holy Spirit was the most important thing, even more important than the specific ritual of baptism.

Exactly. That idea is woven throughout Acts. Okay, so Paul leaves Corinth after expertly using Roman law to his advantage.

Next stop, Ephesus. This is a massive city, the heart of Roman Asia, home to the incredible Temple of Artemis. It's like, where do you even start spreading the gospel in a place like that? Paul was a master communicator.

He set up shop in the school of Tyrannus. Maybe Tyrannus was a philosopher or a teacher. Anyway, Paul starts teaching in a style that would have been familiar to the Ephesians.

So meeting people where they're at makes sense. And get this, public life in Ephesus pretty much wrapped up by 11 a.m., so Paul might have even had a day job before his afternoon teaching gigs. Wow, talk about dedication.

Juggling a job and spreading the gospel, that's next-level commitment. But it wasn't just words, right? Paul was performing miracles and exorcisms left and right. I bet that drew some serious crowds.

Oh yeah, tons of people were returning to Christianity because of these miracles. But then we get this hilarious story about these seven sons of Siva. They're these Jewish exorcists who think they can just use Jesus' name like a magic spell to cast out demons.

They get a harsh lesson in the difference between just saying a name and actually having spiritual authority. Wait, what happened? So they try to cast out a demon, and this demon basically laughs in their faces, sends them running away naked and humiliated. The whole town has been buzzing about that one.

That's incredible. What does this incident tell us about the power dynamics in Ephesus? Ephesus was a city obsessed with magic and amulets, but Paul's ministry was different. He had real power backed by the Holy Spirit, and everyone could see it.

And that leads to one of the most dramatic scenes in Acts, the burning of the magic books. This wasn't just a few scrolls. We're talking about a small fortune going up in smoke.

Yeah, 50,000 drachmas. That's like 50,000 days' wages for an average worker. Imagine someone today burning a pile of winning lottery tickets.

Wow. What does that tell us about how Paul's message impacted people? People were so convinced by what Paul was saying and the power behind it that they were ready to give up anything, even their most valuable possessions, to follow Jesus. But all this activity, all these conversions started to make some people nervous, especially a silversmith named Demetrius, who made a pretty good living selling shrines to Artemis.

Ah, so it's not just about faith, but economics too. Exactly. Paul's message might not have been directly attacking Artemis, but it was definitely undermining her.

And that directly threatened Demetrius's livelihood. That's a theme we see pop up a few times in Acts, right? Challenging religious beliefs, especially when money is involved, can have some serious consequences. Reminds me of that incident back in Acts 16, where Paul and Silas got thrown in jail for messing with a fortune teller's business.

Like, don't mess with my money. Yeah, exactly. And in this context, with tensions already running high, that's when the riot in Ephesus breaks out.

And this wasn't some little street brawl, right? Demetrius, this guy's a natural-born rabble-rouser, whips up this massive crowd, and they all end up in that gigantic theater in Ephesus. That place could hold over 20,000 people. Oh, it must've been absolute pandemonium.

Now there were these important figures called Asiarchs. They were like patrons or sponsors. And some of them were even friends with Paul.

They're stuck in the middle of this whole mess. Can you tell us a bit about how this patron-client system worked in those days and how it affected things? So the patron-client system was this intricate web of obligations and favors. The Asiarchs had to keep order and protect their reputations, but they also wanted to help Paul.

Talk about a tough spot. And Paul, who's normally so bold, chooses to stay silent, probably to avoid making things worse for his Asiarch buddies. What's that tell us about his leadership style? It shows that Paul wasn't just this fiery in-your-face preacher.

He was also a strategic thinker, willing to put the needs of others before his own desire to speak out. That's some real wisdom right there. Eventually, the city clerk calms everyone down, reminds them that Rome's watching, and this riot could jeopardize Ephesus's status as a free city.

Smart move. Luke, who wrote Acts, is very careful to show that Paul isn't some troublemaker. He's a victim of circumstance.

That's important because one of the accusations against Paul later on is that he stirs up riots, which was a big no-no under Roman law. Right. That kind of charge could even lead to a death sentence.

Luke is really crafting this narrative to show Paul as innocent. So after all this drama, we get a glimpse of Paul's softer side as he says goodbye to the Ephesian elders in Miletus. Yeah, this farewell speech is full of emotion, and it actually connects back to the Old Testament.

Paul calls the elders overseers and shepherds, which links to Ezekiel 34, where God blasts Israel's leaders for neglecting their duties as shepherds of God's people. Ah, so we see this continuity between the Old and New Testaments. Exactly.

And Paul also warns them about fierce wolves trying to infiltrate the flock, which connects to New Testament warnings about false teachers. Interesting. What strikes me is the

contrast between Paul's sometimes tough tone in his letters and the genuine affection he shows here.

It's a reminder that Paul, even with his strong convictions and sometimes harsh words, truly loved his fellow believers, and he deeply cared about the church. Then, to make things even more emotional, Paul drops a bombshell. He believes this is the last time they'll see him.

It really drives home the risks and sacrifices involved in spreading the gospel. Absolutely. As we wrap up this part of Paul's journey, it's clear he wasn't just a brilliant preacher and theologian, but also a skilled diplomat and incredibly dedicated to his calling.

But we'll dive into the next chapter of his adventures after a quick break. Stay with us. When we last left Paul, he was sailing towards Jerusalem, even though he knew danger was waiting for him there.

Like he'd gotten prophetic warnings in every city he visited, you'd think he might turn around. Yeah, it takes some serious guts to keep going when you know you're walking into trouble. And on the way, they stop in Troas, and Paul ends up preaching all night long.

What was that about? Some kind of ancient all-nighter? Well, Paul was leaving the next day, and they had a lot to cover. It's like he was cramming in a whole semester of Christianity 101 before heading into the unknown. And during this marathon sermon, we meet Eutychus, who finds out the hard way that window sills aren't exactly comfy for long sermons.

Oh, those windows back then were huge, and they didn't have glass. So when Eutychus nods off and takes a three-story tumble, that's not just a little bump on the head. Can you imagine? Everyone's freaking out, right? Totally.

But then Paul does something incredible. He goes down, embraces Eutychus, and brings him back to life. Wow.

Talk about a plot twist. What's the significance of this miracle? Is it just a random event or is Luke trying to tell us something deeper? Well, it reminds me of the stories about prophets like Elijah and Elisha in the Old Testament, you know, raising people from the dead. It's like Luke is showing us that God's power is working through Paul too.

And after all that excitement, Paul just keeps on preaching until dawn. The guy was unstoppable. It shows you how seriously he took his mission.

He knew time was precious and he wanted to share as much as he could with the believers in Troas. Talk about dedication. And then they all share a meal together before Paul sets sail again.

Yeah, it's like a beautiful image of community and resilience. Even with all the uncertainty and danger, they come together for fellowship and to strengthen their bonds. It reminds us that those simple acts of community can make all the difference in tough times.

So they sail on and eventually reach Miletus, where Paul calls for a meeting with the Ephesian elders. And this meeting gives us some really valuable insights into the early

church's leadership structure. Paul addresses them as overseers, using the Greek word *episkopoi*, which eventually became the term bishop.

Ah, so we're seeing the beginnings of church hierarchy, even at this early stage. Yep. And what follows is Paul's farewell address, which is packed with advice, warnings about future challenges, and a ton of heartfelt emotion.

He talks about those savage wolves that'll try to sneak into the flock, urging them to watch out for false teachings. It's a clear sign that heresy and division are becoming a real threat to the church. And Paul's basically handing the baton to these elders to protect the integrity of the gospel.

That's a heavy responsibility. And Paul uses himself as an example. Right.

He reminds them of all his hard work, his humility, his suffering for the sake of the gospel. It's more than just bragging, isn't it? Definitely. He's setting the bar for what Christian leadership should look like.

Like, this is how you shepherd the flock. And then we get the super moving scene where Paul kneels down on the beach and prays with them. Yeah, it's a powerful image of unity and shared purpose.

You can really feel that deep spiritual connection between Paul and the Ephesians. As the ship sets sail, there's this overwhelming sadness, knowing that Paul's sailing toward a very uncertain future. It perfectly sets the stage for the final act of Paul's mission.

He's leaving behind the relative safety of his missionary journeys and heading straight into the conflict that will eventually lead to his imprisonment and death. The tension is building. So they set sail again.

And Paul, even though he's facing all this danger, still makes time to connect with people. He has these deep conversations with Jewish believers in Tyre, and they warn him about the trouble brewing in Jerusalem. What does this tell us about the state of the early Christian movement at this point? I think it shows that even though there were differences about certain beliefs and practices, there was still a strong sense of community and genuine concern among those early Jewish and Gentile believers.

They may not have agreed on everything, but they still cared for each other. Right. And in Caesarea, they stayed with Philip the Evangelist, one of the original deacons appointed way back in Acts chapter six.

It's pretty cool how Luke connects those dots throughout the story. Yeah, it highlights how interconnected this early Christian community was. They weren't isolated individuals.

They were part of a network united by their commitment to spreading the gospel. And at Philip's house, they meet Agabus, this prophet who does this dramatic reenactment of what's going to happen to Paul in Jerusalem. He takes Paul's belt, ties up his own hands and feet, and says, this is how the Jews will bind Paul and hand him over to the Romans.

Pretty intense. What was the reaction to this prophecy? Everyone freaks out. Paul's travel buddies, the local believers, everyone's begging him not to go to Jerusalem.

They must have really cared about him. You could feel their love and concern for him. But Paul, being Paul, says he's prepared not only to be bound, but even to die in Jerusalem for Jesus.

Talk about unwavering commitment. What's fueling Paul's determination, even when he knows what he's walking into? It reminds me of Jesus's own words. You know, it's a powerful statement of faith.

And it really shows how deeply the gospel had transformed Paul's life. Yeah. So Paul says goodbye to his friends and sets sail for Jerusalem, knowing that his toughest trial is waiting for him there.

This is a pivotal moment in Paul's story. Everything Luke's been building up to is about to come to a head. The suspense is killing me.

After a quick break, we'll pick up Paul's story as he enters Jerusalem and faces the storm head-on. We left Paul sailing right into the lion's den, Jerusalem. What was the scene like when he finally got there? Tense, super tense.

Paul meets with James and the elders of the Jerusalem church, and they're understandably worried. They knew some Jewish believers weren't thrilled about Paul's message, you know, about freedom from the law. So there was already this kind of simmering conflict between the Jewish and Gentile branches of the early church.

Exactly. Some Jewish Christians believe Gentile converts should still follow all the Jewish customs and rituals. It was a big point of disagreement.

And they suggest that Paul participate in this purification ritual at the temple. Seemed like a reasonable idea at the time, right? Yeah. A way to show respect for Jewish traditions and maybe smooth things over.

Yeah, a gesture of goodwill trying to bridge that gap. Shows that Paul wasn't totally against accommodating Jewish sensitivities. But, oh boy, it backfires big time.

Right. Some Jewish believers from Asia, probably the same ones who had beef with Paul back in Ephesus, spot him in the temple and start spreading rumors, saying he's defiling this holy place. Talk about pouring gasoline on a fire.

And things explode. Boom! Full-blown riot. They drag Paul out of the temple ready to beat him.

And luckily, Roman soldiers, who were always on edge in Jerusalem, intervene just in time. Talk about a powder keg situation. You've got angry Jewish mobs, nervous Roman soldiers, and Paul stuck in the middle.

It really highlights the whole volatile mix of politics and religion in Jerusalem at the time. The Romans were constantly trying to keep a lid on things in this city that was just brimming with tension. And then Paul just throws another ingredient into the mix.

But even the quick thinker, Paul sees a chance in all the chaos. He starts speaking in Aramaic, figuring maybe he can reason with the crowd. Makes sense.

Appeal to them on their own terms. He tells them about his conversion, his mission to preach to the Gentiles, his total devotion to the God of Israel. It's a powerful testimony, but let's just say it wasn't a hit with everyone.

So even speaking their language, his message still ruffled some feathers. Yeah. For many, it was just too radical.

That message of inclusion, freedom from the law, it was deeply offensive to those who clung to strict Jewish tradition. Then we have Claudius Lysias, the Roman commander who's totally lost. He's like, who is this guy? Why is everyone freaking out? He assumes Paul must be some dangerous rebel leader.

Maybe even that Egyptian guy who led a revolt a few years back shows how clueless the Roman authorities were about all the intricacies of Jewish religious disputes. And here's where Paul's Roman citizenship becomes his saving grace. Bingo.

He demands a hearing before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council. Smart move using his Roman rights to navigate this messy situation. But even the Sanhedrin can't agree, right? Total division.

The Pharisees, they're kind of sympathetic to Paul. But the Sadducees, totally opposed. The whole thing erupts into another shouting match, and the Roman commander has to step in again to save Paul from the mob.

Seems like Paul had a real talent for attracting trouble. But even in all this chaos, he gets a message of hope. Oh yeah.

Paul has this vision where he's told he will testify about Jesus in Rome. Powerful reminder that even when everything's falling apart, God's still in control, working things out according to his plan. That must have been encouraging for Paul.

But the danger's not over yet, is it? Nope. Paul's nephew overhears this plot to kill him; more than 40 Jewish men are involved. He runs to the Roman commander, who, realizing how serious this is, decides to transfer Paul to Caesarea under heavy guard.

So Paul's journey continues, but this time as a prisoner. Exactly. He's off to Caesarea for trial before the Roman governor, Felix.

Paul's mission isn't done, but it's going to look a whole lot different from now on. Well, we've journeyed with Paul through legal battles, angry mobs, even a resurrection. His story in Acts 18-20 is pretty amazing.

What stands out to me is his incredible resilience, his dedication to his calling, and the power of the gospel to change lives, even in the midst of chaos and persecution. And it's all rooted in his unshakable faith. It's inspiring to see him face every challenge with set conviction.

No matter what he went through, he never lost sight of his mission. He knew God was right there with him every step of the way. That's a powerful message for all of us today, isn't it? It is.

It really is. No matter what we're going through, we can have that same trust in God's presence and guidance. Absolutely.

Paul's story is a great reminder that faithfulness often comes with a cost, but God's ultimately in control, working out his purposes, even in our struggles. And so we wrap up the steep dive, leaving you with a question to ponder. Knowing what awaited him in Jerusalem, did Paul make the right call by going, or should he have listened to those warnings and stayed away? It's a tough one and something for us all to think about as we navigate our own journeys of faith.

Thanks for joining us for this incredible exploration of Acts.