

Dr. Craig Keener, Acts, Session 21

Podcast Audio Overview

Acts 21-22

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Buckle up, folks, because this deep dive is going to be a wild ride. We're heading back to Jerusalem with the Apostle Paul, and let me tell you, things are about to get intense. Oh, you can say that again.

Acts chapters 21 and 22 are packed with drama, prophecies, riots, you name it. And with Dr. Keener as our guide, we're going to unpack all the hidden meanings and historical contexts that often get overlooked. Keener's lecture is like having a backstage pass to the early church.

He starts by talking about how important these travel accounts would have been to the original audience. Right. It's easy to skim over those details, but to folks back then, each location would spark vivid memories and associations.

It's like Keener saying, hey, pay attention, these details are clues. Yeah, like that stop in Petra is just a quick mention, but Keener points out that it was a major hub for the Alexandrian grain trade. The Roman Empire's lifeline.

That tiny detail reveals how interconnected the ancient world really was and how easily ideas and people could move through those networks. It's like those ancient shipping lanes were the information superhighways of their day. And speaking of interconnectedness, what about Tyre? Ah, Tyre.

Remember back in Luke, it was implied that Tyre was facing judgment. Now, boom, they've got a Christian community thriving there. Talk about a turnaround.

It's a testament to the spread of the gospel and the power of repentance, right? Absolutely. It also highlights the growing unity and hospitality among these early believers. They were breaking down barriers and welcoming people from all sorts of backgrounds.

It's a beautiful picture of what the church can be when it's truly living out its mission. OK, but now things take a turn for the dramatic. Paul starts receiving prophetic warnings left and right, telling him not to go to Jerusalem.

And Keener gets pretty personal here. He talks about his own struggles with discerning God's will, how sometimes the path isn't clear even when you're seeking guidance. It's reassuring to know that even a renowned scholar like Keener has those moments of doubt.

But it makes you wonder: how do you move forward when you've got these warning signs flashing? That's the challenge of faith, right? Sometimes you only get those breadcrumbs of guidance, not the whole loaf. You have to trust that God's got a bigger plan, even if you can't see the whole picture. And Keener uses examples like John the Baptist questioning Jesus and Elisha having a fuller understanding than the other prophets.

It's like even those considered spiritual giants wrestled with limited perspectives. It humanizes those biblical figures, doesn't it? And it makes Paul's dilemma all the more relatable. So Paul arrives in Jerusalem despite all those red flags.

And even his lodging choices are significant, according to Keener. He stays with Manasseh first, then with Philip the Evangelist. Keener sees these as intentional choices, suggesting that there were important conversations and knowledge-sharing happening behind the scenes.

I love that. It's like those deleted scenes that never made it into the final cut. But they're crucial for understanding the full story.

And speaking of Philip, we can't forget about his four daughters. The prophetesses. It's a detail that often gets overlooked.

But Keener emphasizes their active role in the early church, especially considering their young age. It challenges our assumptions about leadership, doesn't it? God uses people from all walks of life, regardless of age or gender. And then we have that scene that sends chills down my spine.

Every time I read it, the prophet Agabus arrives and binds his own hands and feet with Paul's belt. What a dramatic way to foreshadow Paul's imprisonment. Talk about a visual prophecy.

Keener connects this to Old Testament prophetic practices, where actions spoke louder than words. It's a reminder that prophetic messages often have a symbolic element, a deeper meaning beyond the literal act. So even with those ominous warnings, Paul presses on.

What was so crucial about his mission to Jerusalem? Keener argues that Paul was on a mission of reconciliation, trying to bridge the divide between Jewish and Gentile believers. And then there's the whole issue of the collection from the Gentile churches for the believers in Jerusalem. I've always heard that the Jerusalem church rejected it.

That's a common misconception. Keener addresses this head-on. Think about it.

If they had rejected that gesture of support, it would have been a major sign of hostility. It would rip the early church apart. It makes you realize that unity was hard won, especially with all those cultural and theological tensions simmering beneath the surface.

Not to mention the external pressures. Remember, the Jerusalem church was facing persecution, economic hardship, all sorts of challenges. Keener does a great job of setting the historical context.

He talks about rising Judean nationalism, tensions with Roman rule. It's a powder keg ready to explode. And then, of course, the rumors start flying about Paul.

Accusing him of teaching Jews to abandon their customs, basically undermining the law. Keener draws a fascinating parallel to how Caesar's enemies spread lies about him. Fake news is nothing new.

It's like history keeps repeating itself, doesn't it? So Paul's caught in this web of political intrigue and misinformation, but he's still trying to bridge the gap between Jewish and Gentile believers. But I thought he personally observed Jewish customs. He did.

And that's where things get really tricky. Keener highlights the distinction between Paul's personal practice and his opposition to imposing those customs on Gentile believers. It's a nuance that's often lost, but it's crucial for understanding the controversy surrounding his ministry.

It's like he's trying to walk this tightrope, respecting his heritage while embracing this new, inclusive vision of faith. So what happens next? The tension is building. The rumors are spreading.

Paul tries to demonstrate his respect for Jewish customs by supporting some Nazarite vows, even participating in temple rituals. He's trying to build bridges, but it backfires spectacularly. And cue the riot.

I bet those Ephesian Jews who already had it out for Paul were just waiting for an excuse to pounce. They see him in the temple, assume he's violating sacred space, and all hell breaks loose. Keener points out that their accusations are baseless, based on prior associations and prejudice.

It's mob mentality at its worst. So they're about to tear Paul limb from limb, but Keener suggests there's a deeper meaning behind Paul's actions, even those Nazarite rituals. He sees it as part of a broader vision of a new temple in Christ.

This idea wasn't unique to Paul. It was circulating among other Jewish groups at the time. And Keener connects it to the dividing wall in Herod's temple, that physical barrier separating Gentiles.

It's like Paul's actions are a symbolic challenge to those divisions, a foreshadowing of his later writings about Christ breaking down barriers. It's ironic that Paul, a Jew, is accused of violating the temple while his Gentile companion is completely innocent. Talk about missing the point.

It shows how cultural and theological blind spots can fuel conflict. And just when it seems like Paul's a goner, Roman soldiers from the Fortress Antonia swoop in and save him from the mob. Talk about a dramatic entrance.

It's like something out of a movie. And Keener, being Keener, even points out that architectural detail of the wide stairway leading from the fortress to the temple, adding this touch of realism to the scene. But there's a twist, right? The Tribune, Claudius Lysias, has no idea what's going on.

He thinks Paul is some kind of revolutionary, a threat to Roman order. So Paul's rescued from one dangerous situation only to find himself in another. But this confusion actually gives Paul a surprising opportunity.

He gets to address the crowd, the very people who were trying to kill him moments ago. Keener compares this to Peter's Pentecost sermon, hinting at another Pentecost-like moment. What a way to frame it.

It's a reminder that God can work through even the most chaotic situations, using those unexpected twists and turns to advance his purposes. Back again with part two of our deep dive. Things are getting pretty interesting, wouldn't you say? Definitely keeps you on the edge of your seat.

So Paul's surrounded by this angry mob and moments from disaster, and suddenly he gets a chance to address them, the very people who want him dead. It's a wild turn of events. But the way Paul seizes this opportunity is fascinating.

He starts speaking in Aramaic, the language of his Jewish heritage, a direct appeal to the heart of the crowd. OK, but what about everyone who didn't understand Aramaic? Wouldn't that alienate a big chunk of the audience? I mean, those Ephesians who were stirring up trouble, for example? That's precisely the point. Keener points out that those Ephesian accusers wouldn't have understood a word of what he was saying.

It was a calculated move, using language not just to communicate, but also as a way to control the situation. Whoa, I never thought of it that way. Like, he's creating this linguistic barrier, shielding himself from further attacks while simultaneously connecting with those who shared his heritage.

Exactly. Keener even relates this back to his own wife's experiences with language and racial prejudice. It's a reminder that these seemingly small things, like what language we speak, can have a huge impact on how we're perceived and how effectively we can get our message across.

Definitely makes you think about the power of language, doesn't it? And Paul, as Keener shows, was a master of wielding that power. So he starts speaking Aramaic, emphasizing his Jewish roots, and then he goes on to mention his education under Gamaliel. One of the most respected Pharisees of his time, no less.

Wait, but isn't that a bit ironic? I mean, this is the same Paul who was persecuting Christians before his conversion. Wouldn't bringing up Gamaliel just remind everyone of his past? That's the genius of Paul's strategy. He's leaning into that irony, you see.

He's saying, look, I was more zealous for the law than even Gamaliel, and look where it got me. He's using his own radical transformation to build credibility and create a sense of empathy with the crowd. It's like he's disarming his critics before they can even launch an attack.

He's owning his past, acknowledging those mistakes, and then pivoting to this message of grace and forgiveness. It's a powerful rhetorical technique. Yeah.

But he doesn't stop there. He goes on to talk about his mission to the Gentiles, and that's when things really get heated again. Ah, yes, the Gentile question.

That's a whole other can of worms. Despite the seemingly conciliatory tone, Paul's mention of the Gentiles is like throwing a match into a powder keg. It just shows how deeply divided the situation in Jerusalem was, how these theological differences were intertwined with political and cultural tensions.

It's a reminder that even the most genuine attempts at reconciliation can face fierce resistance when people feel like their core beliefs or their identity are threatened. And that's exactly what happens. The crowd erupts again, chaos descends on the scene, and the Roman soldiers have to step in once more to rescue Paul from the mob.

Seriously, this guy can't catch a break. It seems like every time he turns around, there's another riot waiting to happen. But this time, the Roman Tribune realizes things have gone too far.

He decides to take Paul into protective custody, not just for Paul's safety, but also to prevent further unrest within the temple. You have to imagine that the Tribune was getting pretty tired of dealing with these constant outbreaks. But Keener sees a deeper meaning here, right? He draws a parallel between Paul's situation and Jesus' own trial and condemnation.

He does. Keener highlights this recurring theme of innocent individuals being caught in the crosshairs of political and religious turmoil. It's a reminder that following your convictions, especially when those convictions challenge the status quo, can come at a high cost.

Definitely a sobering thought. So Paul is back in Roman custody, but this time, things feel different. Keener points out that the final quarter of Acts focuses heavily on Paul's imprisonment.

And this shift in focus is significant. Remember, in Roman culture, imprisonment was a mark of shame. So if Paul, the leader of the Gentile mission, was seen as a criminal, it could have severely damaged the credibility of the early church.

So these later chapters aren't just about Paul's legal battles. They're also about the early church defending his ministry, establishing his legitimacy, and making sure his message continues to spread, even from behind bars. It's like they're laying the groundwork for Paul's legacy, showing that even though he's physically confined, his words and his teachings can still have a profound impact.

And that brings us to the cliffhanger ending of Part 2. Paul, facing interrogation and possible torture, reveals his trump card. I am a Roman citizen. Talk about a mic drop moment.

It's like something out of a courtroom drama. And Keener suggests that Paul might have deliberately waited until this moment to reveal his citizenship, using it strategically to ensure a fair hearing. It's a brilliant move.

The power dynamics shift instantly. The Tribune, terrified of the legal consequences of mistreating a Roman citizen, is suddenly scrambling to figure out what to do with this troublesome apostle. So what happens next? Does Paul get a fancy Roman feast and a personal apology from the Tribune? Not exactly.

The Tribune, still trying to appease the Jewish leaders while protecting himself, decides to convene the Sanhedrin, hoping they can provide some clarity on the charges against Paul and maybe offer a solution that satisfies everyone. Wait, the Sanhedrin? Isn't that the Jewish High Court? It's like throwing Paul to the wolves. Surely the Tribune must know they're not exactly impartial in this situation.

Exactly. And that's where Keener's insights really shine. He points out that this move by the Tribune is less about seeking justice and more about political maneuvering.

It's a desperate attempt to navigate a volatile situation, balancing Roman authority with the demands of the Jewish leadership. It sounds like a recipe for disaster. So what happens when Paul stands before the Sanhedrin? Does he launch into another eloquent defense? He tries, but the situation quickly unravels.

Paul, being the astute observer that he is, realizes that the Sanhedrin is deeply divided between the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Ah, yes. The age-old theological rivalry.

Just a quick refresher. What were the main differences between those groups again? The Pharisees, you know, the sticklers for the law, believed in the resurrection and had a lot of influence among the common people. The Sadducees, on the other hand, were more aristocratic and politically connected.

They rejected the afterlife and were mostly concerned with maintaining the status quo. So Paul's basically facing a jury of his peers, but they can't even agree on their own beliefs. It sounds like a complete mess.

How does Paul navigate this theological minefield? He uses his deep understanding of Jewish scripture and tradition to his advantage. He boldly proclaims his belief in the resurrection, a statement calculated to resonate with the Pharisees and maybe even drive a wedge between them and the Sadducees. That's clever.

He's playing to their theological biases, hoping to create a distraction or maybe even gain some allies within the Sanhedrin. But I'm guessing the Sadducees aren't too thrilled about this sudden theological detour. You're right.

The debate escalates. The courtroom erupts in chaos. And guess what? Paul finds himself at the center of another riot.

It seems like trouble follows him wherever he goes. It's becoming a recurring theme, isn't it? So how does Paul escape this time? Do the Roman soldiers make another dramatic entrance? They do. The Tribune, realizing the situation is completely out of control, orders his soldiers to remove Paul from the council chamber and whisk him back into protective custody.

Those Roman soldiers are turning into Paul's personal security detail. But seriously, it's incredible how even the Sanhedrin, a supposedly respectable religious council, descends into this mob-like frenzy. You'd think they'd be a little more, you know, civilized.

This whole incident, as Keener explains, just highlights the need for Paul's legal defense in the later chapters of Acts. His words and actions were constantly being twisted, leading to

false accusations and threats against his life. It was a dangerous time to be preaching a new message.

So what's next for Paul? He's back in Roman custody, but the Tribune can't just keep him locked up indefinitely without some sort of trial, can he? You're right. The Tribune, recognizing the precariousness of his position and the potential legal fallout from mishandling a Roman citizen, decides to send Paul to Felix, the Roman governor of Judea, for a formal hearing. Felix.

That name rings a bell. Wasn't he, uh, how do I put this delicately, a bit of a shady character? Keener describes him as ruthless and ambitious, more interested in political expediency than justice. You know, the kind of guy who'd sell his own mother for a promotion.

Not exactly someone you'd want deciding your fate. So Paul's being sent to a corrupt governor with a reputation for brutality. It doesn't sound like things are looking up for him.

It definitely raises the stakes. Paul's fate now rests in the hands of a powerful and unpredictable Roman official. And that, my friend, sets the stage for the final chapter of our deep dive into Acts chapters 21 and 22.

All right, deep divers, we're back for the final leg of our journey with Paul. Last we left him, he was being shipped off to face Governor Felix. And let's just say, this Felix guy, well, he doesn't exactly have a reputation for fairness.

Not exactly known for handing out participation trophies. Keener paints him as this power-hungry, kind of ruthless Roman official, more interested in lining his pockets and pleasing the emperor than actually upholding justice. Sounds like Paul's in for a rough ride.

I bet those Jewish leaders back in Jerusalem were pretty pleased with this arrangement. Oh, yeah. They probably saw Felix as someone they could manipulate.

You know, someone who'd side with them against this troublesome apostle. And Keener suggests that Felix might have seen this as an opportunity, too. A chance to maybe squeeze a bribe out of Paul or just use this whole situation to his political advantage.

Talk about a conflict of interest. So what happens when Paul finally gets his day in court, so to speak? It's quite a showdown. You've got the Jewish leaders bringing all these charges against Paul, inciting rebellion, blasphemy, violating the temple, the whole nine yards.

They're throwing everything they can at him, hoping for a quick conviction. I bet they underestimated Paul. This guy's got a knack for thinking on his feet and turning even the most hostile situations to his advantage.

He doesn't disappoint. He delivers this incredible defense, weaving together Roman law, Jewish customs, and his own personal testimony. He argues that he's committed no crime against Rome or the Jewish people.

He even emphasizes his deep respect for the law and his unwavering faith in the God of his ancestors. He's appealing to their sense of history and tradition, trying to find common ground. It's like he's turning the courtroom into his pulpit.

I can almost picture him standing there, fearlessly proclaiming the gospel, even while he's on trial. And that's exactly what Keener highlights. Paul's defense isn't just about saving his own skin.

It's an opportunity for him to share the message of Jesus, even in this unlikely setting. He talks about the resurrection, the hope of salvation, all these core Christian beliefs that must have sounded pretty radical to a Roman governor like Felix. It's like he's planting seeds, even in the midst of this hostile environment.

So if Paul's defense was so convincing, why didn't Felix just release him? Well, Felix was playing a different game, remember? He was hoping to get a bribe from Paul. He figured this influential apostle must have wealthy friends who would pay handsomely for his freedom. So he stalls, keeps stringing Paul along, hoping to strike a deal.

That's awful. It turns Paul into a pawn in this corrupt political game. What a betrayal.

It's a dark chapter, for sure. But even in these terrible circumstances, Paul continues to share his faith. Keener even mentions that Paul manages to convert some of his guards.

Wow, now that's making the most of a bad situation. But what about Felix? Did he ever make a decision about Paul's case? He did, but not until his governorship was about to end. He was under pressure, you see, from both the Jewish leaders and Paul's supporters.

It was a real dilemma. He didn't want to anger either side. So what did he do? Did he finally do the right thing and set Paul free? He took the coward's way out, left Paul in prison, and passed the buck to his successor, a guy named Festus.

Classic political move. Avoid making a tough decision and just hope the problem goes away. So tell me about this Festus.

Was he any better than Felix? Well, he was another Roman official appointed by the emperor to keep things under control in Judea. And as soon as he arrived, those Jewish leaders were right there pressuring him to reopen Paul's case and condemn him. They just couldn't let it go, could they? Was Festus swayed by their arguments? He was a bit more cautious than Felix, and decided to hear Paul out before making a decision.

So Paul gets another chance to defend himself. Round two of the courtroom drama. Did Paul bring his A-game again? Oh, absolutely.

He insisted on his innocence, claimed he hadn't broken any Roman or Jewish laws. But this time, something interesting happened. Paul started talking about his belief in the resurrection, and it just completely threw Festus off.

Why? What was so strange about believing in the resurrection? I mean, it's a core Christian belief, right? It is, but you got to remember Festus was a Roman, steeped in Roman culture and philosophy. The whole idea of a physical resurrection would have seemed totally

foreign to him, maybe even ridiculous. It's like these two worldviews colliding: the hope and faith at the heart of Christianity, bumping up against the logic and pragmatism of Roman society.

Exactly. And Festus is just baffled. He doesn't know what to make of Paul or his claims.

So he does something that could have been disastrous for Paul. He suggests sending him back to Jerusalem for a trial before the Sanhedrin. Back to Jerusalem? Are you kidding me? After everything Paul went through there, that's basically a death sentence.

Paul knew it, too. So he did something incredibly bold. He invoked his right as a Roman citizen and appealed to Caesar.

Whoa, talk about a power move. It's like that legal Hail Mary going straight to the top. It was a right granted to all Roman citizens, a way to bypass local courts and take your case directly to the emperor.

And by doing this, Paul completely changed the course of his story. He was no longer just a Jewish apostle facing persecution in some far-off province. He was now on his way to Rome, the heart of the empire, to plead his case before the most powerful man in the world.

That's an amazing twist. So even though Paul's journey is far from over, it seems like we've reached the end of our deep dive into Acts chapters 21 and 22. What a journey it's been.

From prophetic warnings to courtroom showdowns, we've seen how Paul navigated these incredibly complex political and religious landscapes, always staying true to his mission, even in the face of danger and opposition. And thanks to Dr. Keener's insights, we've uncovered layers of meaning that might have otherwise gone unnoticed. I feel like I've gained a whole new perspective on this part of the Bible.

It's not just some ancient story. It's a powerful reminder of the challenges and triumphs of the early church and how those challenges in many ways mirror the challenges we face today. And hopefully by understanding the historical context, we can better appreciate the courage and resilience of those early believers and find inspiration for our own journeys of faith.

You know, no matter what obstacles we might encounter. Well said. So as we wrap up this deep dive, we encourage all of you to keep exploring, read Acts, delve into Paul's letters, and keep searching for those hidden treasures within the scriptures.

You never know what you might discover. And we'll be back soon with another deep dive, uncovering more fascinating stories and insights from the ancient world. Until then, happy exploring, everyone.