

Dr. Craig Keener, Acts, Session 22

Podcast Audio Overview

Acts 23-26

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Buckle up, everybody, because today we're diving into some serious drama in the early church. The arrest and trials of the Apostle Paul. That's a good one.

As documented in Acts chapters 23 through 26. We're going to be using this awesome lecture by Dr. Craig Keener as our guide. He's a great scholar.

And trust me, this is going to be like a legal thriller meets ancient history. Oh yeah, for sure. You are going to be hooked by the end of this.

Absolutely, and what makes this section of Acts so captivating is that we see how Paul uses his deep understanding of both Jewish and Roman law to navigate this incredibly complex and dangerous situation. Yeah, it's amazing. We're talking about a guy who is constantly on the edge of disaster, facing accusations and plots and trials left and right.

So our mission today is to unpack the key events, Paul's legal strategies, and the historical context to really get a grip on how he managed to not only survive, but actually advance his mission in the face of such intense opposition. It's a master class in resilience and strategy. So let's start with the Sanhedrin hearing.

Paul has just been arrested in Jerusalem, accused of defiling the temple. And the Roman tribune, Claudius Lysias, wants to get to the bottom of this. So he brings Paul before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council.

You might think this would, you know, bring some clarity to the situation. Right, but Lysias really underestimated the level of tension within the Sanhedrin itself. This wasn't like some unified body.

You know, it was this melting pot of different factions and different theological viewpoints. Gotcha. And Paul knows this, right? Like, he's not walking into this blind.

No. Right out of the gate, he gets slapped in the face by order of the high priest, Ananias. What a way to start a hearing, right? I mean, talk about a hostile witness.

This wasn't just like some random act of violence or anything. It was a calculated insult, a violation of Jewish law, designed to provoke Paul and make him, you know, lose his— Paul, instead of, like, you know, reacting emotionally, responds with a quote from Scripture, calling Ananias a whitewashed wall. Oh, yeah.

Referencing hypocrisy. It's a brilliant move. Absolutely.

Because he turns that accusation of disrespect right back on the high priest. He doesn't just defend himself, though, right? He then strategically reveals that he himself is a Pharisee and kind of throws this theological grenade into the mix by bringing up the resurrection. Wait, why was that so significant? Well, because the Pharisees believed in the resurrection, but the Sadducees vehemently opposed it.

So by invoking this doctrine, Paul basically splits the Sanhedrin right down the middle and turns his trial into this theological free-for-all. It's like he's a legal judo master using his opponent's own weight against them. And this played right into Roman legal strategy, from what I understand.

It did, absolutely. You see, Roman law at the time had a policy of relative religious tolerance within their provinces. As long as public order wasn't being disrupted, Rome was generally content to let different religious groups manage their own affairs.

So by turning his trial into this theological dispute, Paul effectively framed it as an internal Jewish matter, something the Romans would have been hesitant to get involved in. That's so clever. So Laci, witnessing this chaotic scene, realizes it's not a simple law-and-order issue.

He basically has to rescue Paul from these fighting factions. I mean, just picture this scene. It really highlights the effectiveness of Paul's strategy here.

He understood the dynamics at play, both within the Jewish community and within the Roman legal system. And he used that knowledge to his advantage. Yeah, talk about thinking on your feet.

But the drama doesn't end there. We find out that there's an assassination plot against Paul. 40 Jewish men vowed to kill him.

They even took an oath not to eat or drink until they had done it. Yeah, they were serious. Wow, that's commitment.

It really highlights the intensity of the opposition Paul was facing. These weren't just, you know, casual disagreements. These are people who saw Paul as a threat to their entire way of life.

Yeah. And they were willing to go to extreme lengths to silence him. Luckily for Paul, his nephew finds out about the plot and warns Laci.

So now Festus has to scramble to get Paul out of Jerusalem. Yeah, and his solution is actually pretty impressive. He organizes this forced overnight march to Antipatrus, this Roman garrison city about 30 miles northwest of Jerusalem.

And it involved over 470 soldiers. Wow. 200 legionaries, 200 spearmen, and 70 cavalry.

470 soldiers just for one guy. Yeah. That's some serious high-profile protection.

It really shows us how serious this threat against Paul was. Festus realized that this wasn't just, you know, a minor disturbance. This was a major security issue.

And he had to take decisive action to prevent a potential bloodbath in Jerusalem. That's incredible. And it also says something about Roman military power, too.

I mean, imagine trying to organize that kind of logistical operation on such short notice in the middle of the night. It's impressive. It's a testament to Roman efficiency and their control over the region.

They had the resources and the infrastructure to mobilize a significant force very quickly and decisively. So after this dramatic escape, Paul ends up in Caesarea, standing trial before Governor Felix. And this overnight march actually becomes an important part of Paul's case.

It really adds weight to Festus' official report to Felix, painting this picture of this volatile situation that required, you know, this decisive Roman intervention. Right. And that report becomes part of the legal record, which, as we'll see, Paul is going to use to his advantage.

OK, so let's dig into this trial before Felix a little bit. Who are the key players here and what are the charges against Paul? Well, on one side, you have Paul's accusers. They've hired this skilled Roman orator named Tertullus to present their case.

And Tertullus' speech is really interesting because it's full of flattery toward Felix, you know, praising his just governance and emphasizing the threat that Paul poses to Roman order. Oh, so they're trying to play the political game a little bit, buttering up the governor, framing Paul as this dangerous rebel. Precisely.

And then in contrast to Tertullus' kind of theatrical presentation, Paul delivers this very measured and strategic defense. He starts off by acknowledging Felix's experience as a judge, which is, you know, a subtle but effective way of kind of establishing credibility. He's appealing to Felix's ego a little bit, acknowledging his authority.

Smart move. Exactly. And then he proceeds to methodically dismantle the accusations against him point by point.

He emphasizes his short time in Jerusalem, his lack of involvement in any riots. He even highlights his charitable acts, painting this picture of himself as this peaceful and upstanding citizen. So he's really working to build a case for good character, trying to show that he's not the troublemaker they're making him out to be.

Right. And then he does something that on the surface might seem counterintuitive. He admits to his belief in the resurrection.

Why would he do that? Wouldn't that just give his accusers more ammunition to use against him? Remember what we were talking about earlier, about Roman law and religious tolerance. By bringing up the resurrection, Paul is cleverly reframing the charges against him as a matter of Jewish religious debate, something that the Roman legal system was designed to avoid. It was another brilliant maneuver to shift the focus away from Roman law and back into the realm of Jewish internal disputes.

That's amazing. It's like he's playing 40 chess while everyone else is playing checkers. What does Felix do with all this? Does he rule in Paul's favor? Well, that's where things get a little bit frustrating.

Despite Paul's strong defense, Felix delays his judgment. He's clearly hesitant to make a decision, possibly swayed by the political influence of Paul's accusers or, you know, maybe even hoping for a bribe. So Paul is stuck in limbo, waiting for a verdict that never comes.

Yeah. And this waiting game drags on for two whole years. But then the scene shifts again with the arrival of a new governor, Portius Festus, who brings a fresh perspective and a whole new set of challenges to Paul's case.

Oh boy, this is getting good. It is. I can't wait to find out what happens next.

Me too. Welcome back to our deep dive into the arrest and trials of Paul. When we left off, Paul was stuck in this legal limbo, awaiting a verdict from Felix.

But as we all know, sometimes a change in leadership can really shake things up. It can. Enter Porteous Festus, the new Roman governor of Judea.

Yeah, Festus seems to have been a much more straightforward and perhaps just governor than Felix. He immediately picks up Paul's case. But unlike Felix, Festus wants to get a handle on the situation quickly.

OK, so he's not interested in dragging things out, which is good news for Paul, right? Well, not so fast. While Festus might have been a man of action, he was also new to the region and needed to tread carefully. He knew that Paul's case was politically charged and that making the wrong decision could lead to serious unrest.

Yeah, that makes sense. So what does Festus do? Well, he decides to consult with King Agrippa II; you might remember him- his father, Agrippa. I was known for persecuting early Christians, and he even executed James the Apostle.

Hold on. If his father was such a staunch opponent of the early church, wouldn't consulting Agrippa II be like asking a fox to guard the hen house? Well, it's a valid concern. But Agrippa II was actually quite different from his father.

He had a reputation for being more evenhanded and less hostile towards the Christians. Plus, he ruled over a territory that included parts of Galilee and Perea, giving him a vested interest in keeping the peace in the region. So Festus sees him as someone who could provide valuable insight into this case.

Exactly. Festus is looking for guidance, someone who understands the nuances of Jewish law and the political landscape. So Festus arranges a hearing with Agrippa II.

Is this like a formal trial? Not exactly. It's more of a consultation. Think of it as a high-level strategy meeting where Festus presents the case to Agrippa and seeks his perspective.

Okay, so who else is at this meeting? Well, along with Agrippa II, there's his sister Bernice. And she's a fascinating figure in her own right. Bernice was known for her beauty, her political influence, and let's just say her somewhat scandalous relationship with her brother.

Ooh, juicy. Okay, but back to Paul. What happens when he's brought before Agrippa II and Bernice? Well, this is where things take a really interesting turn.

You have to remember that Paul is still a Roman citizen, even though he's being accused of crimes against Jewish law. Right, and we haven't really touched on the implications of his Roman citizenship yet. Can you elaborate on that a bit? Roman citizenship at that time was a highly prized status.

It came with certain rights and privileges, including the right to appeal one's case to the emperor himself. This is a powerful legal safeguard. That protected Roman citizens from arbitrary or unjust treatment by provincial authorities.

So this hearing before Agrippa and Bernice, it's not technically a trial, but it's a chance for Paul to make his case before influential figures who could potentially sway Festus' decision. Exactly. And instead of delivering another carefully constructed legal defense, Paul takes a much bolder approach.

He turns this meeting into an opportunity to preach the gospel. Wow, that's unexpected. He's going for the full conversion play here.

He is. Paul recounts his own dramatic conversion experience, cites the prophets, and proclaims the resurrection of Jesus. He's basically saying, look, this isn't just some legal case.

This is about a profound spiritual truth that has changed my life, and it could change yours, too. So he's aiming for the heart, not just the head. How do Agrippa and Festus react to this impassioned sermon? Well, Festus, who's probably more accustomed to dry legal arguments, finds Paul's outburst a bit overwhelming.

He actually interrupts Paul, questioning his sanity. He says, Paul, your great learning is driving you mad. He actually said that out loud in front of everyone.

He did. Now, some scholars think that Festus might have been using sarcasm. But his reaction also kind of reflects a common perception of prophets and religious zealots at the time.

I can see that. You know, you have figures like John the Baptist living in the wilderness wearing camel hair, eating locusts and honey. People probably thought he was a bit off his rocker, too.

Exactly. And Paul, with his radical claims about a crucified Messiah, would have been seen in a similar light. Festus's reaction, whether sincere or sarcastic, really reveals this cultural gap between Roman pragmatism and the fervor of early Christian belief.

OK, so Festus thinks Paul's a bit over the top. But what about Agrippa? How does he respond? Agrippa, unlike Festus, seems genuinely intrigued by Paul's defense. He's

impressed and even acknowledges that Paul could have been set free if he hadn't appealed to Caesar.

Wait, so Paul appealed to Caesar. That seems like a risky move. Especially if Agrippa was leaning towards releasing him.

Why would he do that? It's actually a brilliant strategic move on Paul's part. And it reveals his deep understanding of the political dynamics at play. Remember, there were still powerful factions in Jerusalem who wanted him dead.

And while Festus might have been more impartial than Felix, there's no guarantee that he would have ruled in Paul's favor. Especially given the pressure from these influential groups. So appealing to Caesar was a way of taking his case out of their reach and putting it in the hands of the highest authority in the empire.

Exactly. By appealing to Caesar, Paul ensures that his case will be heard in Rome, far from the reach of his enemies in Jerusalem. It's a bold move that demonstrates both Paul's courage and his political savvy.

So even though Agrippa acknowledges Paul's innocence, he's bound by Roman law to send him to Rome because of the appeal. And that's where we leave Paul at the end of the section of Acts, still in chains, but heading towards the heart of the Roman Empire. And it really begs the question, what awaits Paul in Rome? Will he face another trial? Or will his appeal to Caesar bring him the justice he's been seeking? All right, well, we'll have to hold that thought because we're out of time for this segment.

Don't worry, we'll be back soon. To explore the final chapter of Paul's journey in part three of our deep dive. Welcome back to our deep dive into the arrest and trials of Paul.

Last time we left off with him sailing toward Rome, having appealed to Caesar. Now, you might think, OK, he's going to the capital of the empire. Surely things are going to be more civilized there, more just.

But you would think. Hold on tight because this voyage is anything but smooth sailing. Yes, sea travel in the ancient world was notoriously dangerous.

And we're talking storms, pirates, unreliable ships, you name it. So we're not talking like a luxury cruise here. This is a perilous adventure.

It is a perilous adventure. In fact, the book of Acts gives us a pretty detailed account of the shipwreck that Paul and his companions experienced on their way to Rome. Yeah.

And this isn't just some dramatic side note. It actually plays a pretty significant role in shaping Paul's experience in Rome. OK, so let's talk about the shipwreck.

What can you tell us about it and how does it impact Paul's situation? Well, first of all, it really highlights those very real dangers that people faced when traveling by sea in the ancient world. Just imagine being caught in this violent storm far from land with a ship that's barely holding together. It had been a terrifying experience.

I can't even imagine. It makes you really appreciate the relative safety and comfort of modern travel. For sure.

But how does Paul respond in this situation? Well, what's so fascinating is how Paul responds to this terrifying ordeal. Even in the midst of all the chaos and the fear, Paul remains calm and collected. He even starts to encourage those around him.

So he's not just a legal strategist. He's also a source of strength and comfort in the face of danger. Absolutely.

And this isn't just blind faith or wishful thinking. Paul draws on his deep conviction that God is with him, even in the darkest of times. And this unwavering belief allows him to face this adversity with remarkable resilience.

It's like the shipwreck becomes a test of his faith, and he passes with flying colors. Yeah, I think that's a great way to put it. And it's important to remember that this event would have been well known in the early Christian community.

It's not just a personal story. It becomes part of Paul's legend, reinforcing this image of him as a man who faces hardship with unwavering faith and divine protection. So despite the shipwreck, Paul eventually makes it to Rome, right? He does, but not exactly like a conquering hero or anything.

He arrives in chains, still under arrest. But there's a surprising twist. Oh, twist.

What do you mean? Instead of being thrown into a harsh Roman prison, he's actually allowed to live under a relatively comfortable form of house arrest. He has a Roman soldier guarding him, but he's allowed to receive visitors. And he has some degree of freedom to move around.

Wow, that's a lot better than I was expecting. So what does Paul do with this unexpected freedom? Well, he does what Paul does best. He preaches the gospel.

Of course. For two whole years while he's waiting for his trial, Paul continues to share his message. He welcomes everyone who comes to visit him.

He's teaching, debating, spreading the Christian message. So even under house arrest, even after a shipwreck, even after all these trials and the constant opposition, Paul never gives up on his mission. Never.

And this really speaks volumes about his character and his commitment to his calling. It shows us that for Paul, spreading the gospel wasn't just a job or a hobby. It was the core of his being.

It was the driving force behind everything he did. What an incredible example of perseverance. As we wrap up this deep dive into Paul's arrest and trials, what are some of the key takeaways for us? What can we learn from his experience, from his legal savvy, his resilience, his unwavering commitment to his mission? Man, there's just so much we can learn from Paul's story.

I think first and foremost, it highlights the importance of understanding and navigating systems. Even when those systems seem complex or unfair, Paul's knowledge of both Jewish and Roman law allowed him to defend himself, to leverage opportunities, and to turn accusations into platforms for his message. That's a great point.

It's like that saying: knowledge is power. The more you understand the rules of the game, the better equipped you are to play it strategically. Right.

And Paul was a master strategist. He didn't just react to situations. He anticipated them.

He planned for them. And he used his understanding of the legal and political landscape to his advantage. And he demonstrated remarkable resilience in the face of adversity.

I mean, shipwrecks, arrests, trials, assassination plots. He went through it all and never wavered. It's true.

His resilience is just so inspiring. It wasn't just about grit or stubbornness. It was fueled by this deep faith and a profound sense of purpose.

Paul believed that he was called by God to share the message of Jesus. And that belief gave him the strength to endure hardship and to overcome any obstacle. And that brings us to perhaps the most important takeaway from Paul's story: the power of staying true to your convictions, even when the world seems to be against you.

Yeah, that's a powerful message that resonates even today. Paul's life shows us that it's possible to live with purpose, to face challenges with courage, and to make a difference in the world. Even when the odds seem stacked against us.

Paul's story is just this incredible reminder that even in the face of adversity, we can find strength in our beliefs. We can use our knowledge strategically. And ultimately, we can achieve great things if we stay true to our calling.

And his journey doesn't end with his arrival in Rome. It's just the beginning of a new chapter. One that sees the Christian message really begin to take root in the heart of the Roman Empire and spread throughout the world.

Well, that's it for today. We've unpacked Paul's arrest, his trials, his legal battles, his shipwreck, and his unwavering commitment to spreading the gospel. It's a story full of drama, intrigue, and inspiration.

And it really leaves us with this thought-provoking question. What impact did Paul's presence in Rome ultimately have on the trajectory of the early Christian movement? That's a question for another Deep Dive another day. Until then, keep exploring, keep questioning, and keep diving deep.