

Dr. Craig Keener, Acts, Session 23

Podcast Audio Overview

Acts 27-28

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All right, ready to set sail. Today, we're diving deep into the book of Acts. Oh, I love this section.

Chapters 27 and 28. Yeah. We're following Paul's journey to Rome.

It's quite the adventure. It really is. And we've got Dr. Keener's Lecture 23 on Acts as our guide.

Perfect source. It's amazing how this section of Acts reads like an adventure story. Yeah.

But also has these profound theological ideas woven throughout. You're going to see Paul's faith put to the test in ways you might not expect. Absolutely.

And you see how his belief shapes not just his own destiny, but everyone around him. I love that. Okay, so let's set the scene.

The fall sailing season is winding down, and Paul, who has longed to go to Rome, is heading there, but as a prisoner. Oh, right. He's under the guard of Julius the Centurion.

Okay. And they're embarking on this journey at a time known for unpredictable weather. Dr. Keener points out they actually set sail after the Day of Atonement.

Interesting. Which was later in the season than ideal and considered risky for sea travel back then. Yeah, that detail about the timing is so important.

Right. Because it really highlights the dangers of ancient seafaring. Yeah.

Dr. Keener cites some ancient sources, including these oracles. Right. Where roughly one out of five consultations about sea voyages- wow.

Predicted trouble. Oh, boy. So setting sail at this time of year would have definitely raised some eyebrows.

I can only imagine, right? Yeah. Because you appreciate modern cruise ships. Oh, tell me about it.

With their stabilizers and weather forecasting. Totally. But back then- yeah.

It was a whole different ball game. Yeah. So their journey begins in Caesarea.

They head north to Sidon. Okay. Then on to Myra, where they board this massive Alexandrian grain ship.

A grain ship. And when I say massive, I mean it. Oh, yeah.

Dr. Keener mentions a ship from that era- okay. Called the Isis that could hold 600 people. Wow.

The whole ship has 276 people on board. Still a lot. Which is still a lot of people crammed together.

Yeah. And remember, we're not talking luxury accommodations here. Right.

Passengers would have slept on deck. Oh, wow. Brought their own food and supplies with all the cargo- yeah.

Likely wheat stored below. Gotcha. Conditions could get pretty cramped.

Yeah. And as we're about to see, it's extremely dangerous when the weather turns sour. And boy, does it turn sour.

Oh. Dr. Keener talks about how treacherous the seas could be in winter. Yeah.

Which is why Paul urges Timothy in his letters to come visit before winter sets in. Right. Sailing in the fall was risky enough.

Yeah. But then near Crete, they encounter this ferocious northeasterly wind. Oh, no.

Called the Eurycleidon. The Eurycleidon. It's a wind known for its power and unpredictability.

Yikes. And it blows them way off course. I bet.

What I find really compelling is how Luke, the author of Acts, describes this storm. Oh, yeah. He uses nautical terms and details about navigation and the ship's movement that perfectly match what historians and marine archaeologists have learned.

Yeah. About Mediterranean seafaring in the first century. Cool.

It really draws you into the story. It does. Making it feel incredibly realistic and intense.

For sure. I can totally picture it. Oh.

The passengers huddled on deck. Right. Waves crashing over the bow.

Oh, man. The crew frantically throwing cargo overboard to lighten the load. Wow.

Days turn into nights, and they're completely at the mercy of this raging storm. That's terrifying. And this is where things get really interesting.

Okay. In the midst of all this chaos, Paul, who is still a prisoner. Right.

Receives a divine revelation. Wow. He tells everyone they will survive, but they will first run aground on an island.

It's an incredible moment. Here's Paul bound in chains. Yeah.

Yet he becomes this voice of hope and reassurance in this terrifying situation. I love that. But Dr. Keener is careful to point out.

Okay. That Paul's prophecy comes with a condition. Everyone's survival hinges on them following Paul's instructions.

Interesting. And right on cue. Yeah.

We get this dramatic scene. Okay. Where some of the sailors, fearing for their lives.

Right. Try to escape in the ship's small boat. But the soldiers, at Paul's urging.

Okay. Stop them. You've got to wonder why the soldiers would listen to a prisoner in this situation.

That is a good question. Right. I mean, wouldn't they be focused on their own survival? Right.

Well, Dr. Keener suggests that the soldiers, having observed. Yeah. Paul's unshakable faith and his seemingly uncanny ability to predict events.

Yeah. Are starting to believe he might actually be hearing from God. That's interesting.

They've witnessed his steadfastness. Okay. And perhaps that's starting to plant seeds of doubt about their own assumptions.

I see. So they trust him enough to risk their lives by following his instructions. Wow.

It's a pretty powerful testament to how Paul. Yeah. Even as a prisoner is able to influence those around him.

Absolutely. It's a turning point, not just in the physical journey. Right.

But also in the spiritual one. Yeah. Paul's spiritual authority is growing.

For sure. Even among those who were initially tasked with guarding him. It's amazing.

It really is. Yeah. So as Paul predicted, the ship can't make it to shore safely.

Right. They run aground on the rocks near the island of Malta. Uh-huh.

And the ship starts breaking apart. Oh, man. But miraculously.

Yeah. Just as Paul had promised, all 276 people on board survive. Wow.

That's incredible. Talk about an edge-of-your-seat moment. I know, right? Yeah.

Their survival is attributed to a combination of factors. Okay. Some swim to shore, others cling to planks.

The tide helps push them towards land. Wow. And critically, the soldiers had listened to Paul and spared the prisoners who would have otherwise drowned chained together.

Oh, wow. It's a powerful testament to the impact of Paul's words. Yeah.

And the ripple effect of those who chose to trust him. It really is. Okay.

So they find themselves on Malta. Among people Luke describes as barbarians. Barbarians.

Now, before we jump to conclusions. Okay. Dr. Keener clarifies that this term didn't necessarily mean uncivilized or savage.

Right. In the ancient world, it was often used to describe those who didn't speak Greek. I see.

So it was more about cultural and linguistic differences than any judgment on their character. That makes sense. Yeah.

And it's fascinating how Luke contrasts these barbarians of Malta. Right. Some of the more civilized cities Paul has visited.

Yeah. Where he often faced hostility and rejection. Yeah.

Here on Malta, these barbarians show incredible kindness. I know. It's amazing.

And hospitality to these shipwrecked travelers, welcoming them with open arms. Yeah, it really challenges our assumptions. It does.

About who is truly welcoming and who is not. Absolutely. It's a great reminder that first impressions can be deceiving.

Yeah. And sometimes the most unexpected people show the greatest compassion. I love that.

So picture this. They're huddled around a fire. Okay.

On this cold, wet night on Malta. Right. When out of nowhere, a viper attaches itself to Paul's hand.

Oh my goodness. A viper. This episode with the viper has sparked a lot of debate over the years.

I bet. Some argue that there are no poisonous snakes on Malta today. Right.

Luke must've gotten it wrong. Okay. But Dr. Keter pushes back on that.

Yeah. Pointing out that Malta's environment has changed dramatically. Of course.

Over the past 2000 years. Yeah. Increased human habitation and deforestation.

Right. Could have easily led to the extinction of certain snake species. That makes a lot of sense.

So the islanders, seeing this viper clinging to Paul. Uh-huh. Assume he must be some kind of criminal.

Oh God, no. Believing that he's being punished by divine justice. Oh, wow.

But when he simply shakes the viper off. And is completely unharmed. Okay.

Their reaction flips 180 degrees. Really? They go from thinking he's cursed to believing he's a god. It's a moment of classic Luke and irony.

I know, right? The islanders are so quick to jump to conclusions. Based on their limited understanding and cultural beliefs. Yeah.

First he's a condemned criminal. Then he's a deity. That's crazy.

All thanks to a snakebite. Talk about a roller coaster of assumptions. Oh my gosh.

Now among those showing hospitality to Paul and his companions. Okay. Is Publius.

Publius. The chief person of the island. Dr. Keter suggests this title could indicate that Publius was a prominent figure.

Perhaps even the governor of Malta. He's a Roman citizen, likely fluent in both Latin and Greek. So he represents a bridge between the Roman world and this local Maltese community.

Publius' role is interesting because it shows how Paul, despite being a prisoner, is still able to connect with people of influence and authority. I see. It speaks to Paul's adaptability.

Right. And his ability to engage with people from all walks of life. Yeah.

Regardless of their social standing. And this connection leads to a pretty incredible moment of healing. Oh, wow.

Publius' father is gravely ill. Suffering from what sounds like it could have been malaria. Malaria.

With recurring fevers and dysentery. Oh. Paul goes to him and prays.

Laces hands on him. Right. And miraculously heals him.

This healing echoes the ministry of Jesus. Yes. Where we see many similar acts of compassion and power.

Absolutely. It reinforces this idea of continuity between Jesus' work. Yeah.

And the mission of his followers. Showing that the power of God is still active and working in the world. And naturally, the word of this healing spreads like wildfire.

Of course. Soon others on Malta start bringing their sick to Paul. Wow.

Hoping for similar miracles. That's amazing. Even Julius the Centurion.

Yeah. Who has been observing all of this. Right.

Grows in his respect for Paul. This is another significant detail. Because it shows how Paul, even in captivity.

Yeah. Continues to impact those around him. Right.

His faith, his compassion, and his connection to the divine. Are increasingly evident. Even to a hardened Roman Centurion.

It's amazing. So after three months of unexpected hospitality and ministry on Malta. It's time for Paul to continue his journey to Rome.

Okay. It's now early spring. The seas are calmer.

Right. And a new ship is ready to take them north. Makes sense.

They set sail for Syracuse in Sicily. Uh-huh. Then on to Regium.

Okay. At the southern tip of Italy. Right.

And finally, they made their way up the coast to Puteoli. Puteoli. From there, they'll take a land rep to Rome.

Gotcha. And get this, along the way. They're met by groups of Christians.

Really? Who have come out to greet them. That's incredible. This is such a telling detail.

Yeah. Because it demonstrates the expanding network of believers. And the growth of the early Christian communities.

I love that. As we saw in earlier parts of Acts. Yeah.

These communities often provided hospitality and support. Right. To traveling missionaries and believers like Paul.

For sure. It's a beautiful example of the early church living out their faith in practical ways. It's like the early church's version of a welcome wagon.

I love that. Imagine Paul, after all these delays and detours. Yeah.

Finally approaching Rome. He made it. He's still a prisoner.

But word of his teachings, his miracles, and his unwavering faith has spread ahead of him. I bet. Some people are eager to meet this remarkable figure.

Yeah. Even come out to escort him into the city. It's a powerful moment that hints at the significant role Paul is about to play.

Right. In the heart of the Roman Empire. Absolutely.

Luke, the author of Acts, leaves us with a sense of anticipation. Yeah. Knowing the impact Paul will have on this vast and influential city.

So Paul finally arrives in Rome. This bustling metropolis has a population of over a million people. Dr. Keener really paints a vivid picture of what life was like back then.

Think crowded tenements, limited running water, and a real mix of social classes. He mentions that the Jewish community, which made up about 5% of the city, was mainly concentrated in an area across the Tiber River. Yeah.

Understanding that social and cultural landscape of Rome is crucial. Because it sheds light on the challenges and opportunities Paul would have faced as he started his ministry there. He's stepping into this diverse and complex society.

It really is. A melting pot of cultures and beliefs. And within that society, there was a mix of fascination with and suspicion of Jewish customs and beliefs.

Oh. Dr. Keener highlights how Roman elites, in particular, looked down on things like Sabbath observance, circumcision, and dietary laws. Oh, yeah.

It's a reminder that Paul is navigating not just physical boundaries, but also these cultural and religious ones. This prejudice against Jewish practices is something Paul addresses directly in his letter to the Romans. Oh, interesting.

He tries to bridge the cultural divide and present the gospel in a way that resonates with both Jewish and Gentile audiences. I see that. It's a reminder that Paul was like a master communicator.

Right. Always adapting his message to connect with his audience. Okay.

So even though Paul is under house arrest, he's allowed to stay in his own rented quarters with a guard. He even has access to members of the elite praetorian guard, probably because he's a Roman citizen. And, you know, Paul, he doesn't waste any time.

He immediately starts reaching out to the Jewish community in Rome, eager to share his message with them. Yeah. It speaks volumes about Paul's dedication to his mission.

Right. He's not deterred by his circumstances, by his imprisonment, or the cultural barriers he faces. For sure.

He sees every situation as an opportunity to plant seeds of faith and share the good news about Jesus. Absolutely. Even in the heart of the Roman empire.

He invites the Jewish leaders in Rome to meet with him. And Dr. Keener points out a detail that I found kind of curious. The leaders say they want to hear from Paul because they've

heard bad things about this new movement, but they haven't had much direct contact with it.

You think in a city as connected as Rome, word about this new sector would have spread quickly, right? It does seem a bit odd, but we have to remember the dynamics of the early Christian community in Rome. They had faced expulsion under Emperor Claudius just a few years earlier. Right.

So they were likely scattered and less visible. And with the return of Jewish believers to Rome, they might not have been fully reintegrated into the synagogue network. That makes sense.

That helps explain why there might've been a communication gap. So Paul shares his message, but as we've seen throughout his journey, the response is mixed. Some accept his message while others reject it.

It's that pattern of openness and resistance that has become so familiar in the book of Acts. This mixed reaction prompts Luke to include a powerful quote from the prophet Isaiah that talks about the hardening of hearts and the difficulty some people have in accepting a message that challenges their deeply held beliefs. Right.

It's a reminder that the journey of faith isn't always smooth sailing. The first nod. There'll be those who embrace the message and those who turn away.

Now, the book of Acts ends with Paul preaching in Rome for two years, leaving his ultimate fate kind of open-ended. But Dr. Keener, drawing on early church tradition, believes that Paul was likely released and then later rearrested, eventually becoming a martyr in Rome alongside Peter. While the conclusion of Acts is somewhat ambiguous, it emphasizes that the story doesn't end with Paul's imprisonment.

Right. The mission continues. Yeah.

The work of spreading the gospel goes on even in the face of persecution and hardship. It's like Luke is passing the torch to us, saying, this is where Paul's story ends, but yours is just beginning. What a powerful way to think about it.

One thing that really struck me from Dr. Keener's lecture is this idea of moving from heritage to mission. He explains that we need to be grounded in our spiritual heritage, drawing strength and inspiration from those who came before us: Abraham, the prophets, Jesus, and the early church. But we're also called to embrace the mission to share this good news with others.

It's a call to action urging us to be more than just preservers of the past, clinging to traditions and isolation. We're called to live them out, share them, and be active participants in God's ongoing work in the world. It really makes you think about how we're connecting our own personal journeys of faith to this larger story we all have a part to play.

That's where the book of Acts offers us such incredible guidance. It's not just a historical account. It's a roadmap for how to live out our faith, to be bold in sharing our beliefs, and to trust in God's providence, even when we encounter opposition or uncertainty.

Just like Paul did storms, shipwrecks, imprisonments- he faced them all and never gave up on his mission. One thing I find really impressive is how Paul constantly adapted to his audience and his circumstances, whether he was speaking to Jewish leaders, Roman officials or everyday people. He tailored his message to meet them where they were.

It's a valuable lesson for us as well to effectively communicate our faith. We need to be sensitive to our audience, their backgrounds, their understanding, and their questions. Finding ways to connect the timeless truths of the gospel to the specific context we find ourselves in is key.

It's like we need to be translators of sorts, bridging the gap between this ancient message and the modern world. And just as Paul relied on the power of the Holy Spirit to guide and empower him, we can also tap into that same source of strength and wisdom as we seek to live out our faith and share our beliefs with others. We are not alone on this journey.

We have access to a power that's greater than ourselves. And that's where the real adventure begins. Dr. Keener ends his lecture with a powerful reminder.

We need to be praying for the Holy Spirit to empower us for the mission. If we feel lacking in power, courage, or wisdom, we can ask God for the Holy Spirit, and he will give it to us. It's a simple yet profound truth.

We don't have to rely solely on our own strength and abilities. We can draw on the power of God, the power of the Holy Spirit to guide, equip and embolden us for whatever lies ahead. And just like we see in the book of Acts, the Holy Spirit is still at work in amazing ways, inspiring boldness, enabling miracles, bringing people together and transforming lives.

The story is still being written. God is still at work in the world. And we have the incredible privilege of being a part of it.

What an amazing thought as we wrap up our deep dive into Acts chapters 27 and 28. I'm left with this incredible sense of awe at Paul's unwavering commitment to his mission. And I'm challenged to think about how I can more fully embrace my own calling, my own role in this grand adventure of faith.

I think that's a beautiful takeaway and one that I hope will resonate with all of our listeners. What does it look like for you to move from heritage to mission, to be a living, breathing embodiment of the gospel in your own unique way? And remember, just like Paul's journey, yours won't be without its challenges, its storms, its unexpected detours. But with faith as your compass and the Holy Spirit as your guide, you can navigate those obstacles and make a lasting impact on the world.

Beautifully said. Until next time, keep diving deep, keep exploring, and keep seeking the truth. And keep those aha moments coming.

See you on the next deep dive.