

Dr. Craig Keener, Acts, Session 20, Acts 18-20

6-Min. Video Overview

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Welcome to the Explainer. Today, we're diving into an absolutely wild story. It's about how one man, with a message about a single God, managed to spark riots, take on magicians, and basically go head-to-head with the entire Roman Empire.

So, how exactly does a new belief system shake an empire to its core? We're about to find out. We'll see how the Apostle Paul's ideas weren't just, you know, challenging. They set off legal battles, incredible spiritual showdowns, and yeah, full-blown riots that literally pushed the ancient world right to the edge.

All right, so let's set the stage. Our story kicks off with this guy, Paul. He's a missionary, and his message is, well, it's radical.

He's talking about one, single, exclusive God. And in the Roman world, that's a direct threat to how everything worked. To really get why, we've got to understand the Roman mindset.

Okay, so for the Romans, religion wasn't just this personal thing you did on your own time. Think of it more like a public utility, like the power grid. It was all built on this idea called the Pax Doerun, the peace of the gods.

The deal was simple. You keep the whole pantheon of gods happy, and the empire stays stable and prosperous. So when Paul shows up saying, actually there's only one true God, that's not just a theological debate.

To them, it's like he's trying to cut the power lines to the whole empire. It was seen as incredibly dangerous. So you can imagine the tension building, right? And it finally boils over in the bustling city of Corinth.

This is where Paul faces his first major legal test. His opponents figure, okay, this is it. This is our chance to shut this whole movement down for good.

So they drag him before the Roman pro consul, a guy named Gallio. Their accusation is basically, this man is teaching things that are against Roman law. They're hoping Gallio will see it as a threat to the state.

But Gallio does something really clever. He listens. And then he basically says, look, this isn't a Roman crime.

This sounds like an argument about your own Jewish laws and traditions. It's an internal debate. I'm not getting involved.

And this is the crucial part. By framing it as an internal Jewish dispute, Gallio accidentally gave Christianity this amazing legal shield. See, Judaism was an ancient, respected, and legally protected religion in the empire.

So by saying, oh, you guys are just a branch of that. He basically made it untouchable from a Roman legal perspective. This one decision set a precedent that let the Christian movement grow kind of right under the empire's nose for years to come.

Okay. So Paul gets a pass in the courtroom, but now we're heading to a new city, Ephesus. And Ephesus is a whole different beast.

This place is soaked in magic, the occult, you name it. And here the conflict goes from legal arguments to a straight-up spiritual showdown. We're not talking about laws anymore.

We're talking about raw power. So in the ancient world, a big part of magic was knowing the right names to invoke. It was all about using powerful names to get spirits to do what you wanted.

Well, a group of local exorcists- these seven sons of a guy named Sheva- they see the incredible things happening through Paul, and they think, Hey, we can do that. So they just add the name Jesus to their list of magic words. Like it's just another spell.

They completely missed the point about where the real authority came from. And the response they get, it is absolutely chilling. The demon inside the man basically tells them, look, I know Jesus, and I've heard of Paul, but who in the world are you? It's this terrifying moment where it becomes crystal clear.

This isn't a trick you can just copy. You can't just borrow an authority that isn't yours. And it doesn't stop there.

The possessed man then attacks them, overpowers all seven of them, and chases them out of the house naked and bleeding. I mean, talk about a humiliating defeat. The story spreads like wildfire, and it sends a powerful message across the city.

Whatever this is, it's real. It can't be faked. It can't be bought.

And you definitely can't manipulate it. The fallout from this was just massive. People who have been deep into magic and the occult were genuinely shaken.

They start coming forward, renouncing everything they'd practiced. And to prove it, they bring all their expensive magic scrolls and books. We're talking the equivalent of 50,000 days' wages.

That's a staggering amount of money. And they burn it all in this giant public bonfire. It was a huge, costly, and very public statement.

But you know how it goes. You solve one problem, and a bigger one pops up. Paul's success in Ephesus wasn't just turning people away from magic anymore.

Now it was starting to hit the city right where it hurts, in the wallet. See, Ephesus was famous for one thing above all else: the temple of Artemis. It was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

It was the city's economic engine. Pilgrims flocked there, and the big business was selling these little silver shrines of the goddess. But as more and more people started listening to Paul, well, they stopped buying the shrines and sales started to tank.

And this is where a silversmith named Demetrius comes in. He sees his livelihood just evaporating. So he gets all the other craftsmen together and gives this brilliant manipulative speech.

He mixes civic pride- our great goddess Artemis is being dishonored- with straight-up economic fear. This guy Paul is ruining our business. He knew exactly which buttons to push.

And it worked. The city just explodes. What started as a protest by a bunch of craftsmen spirals into a full-blown riot.

A massive mob storms the city's theater, a place that could hold over 20,000 people. And for two hours, they just chant over and over: Great is Artemis of the Ephesians. They grab two of Paul's friends and drag them into the theater.

The whole city is teetering on the edge of complete chaos. So how does this all end? Not with soldiers, but with some very clever politics. A city official finally manages to get everyone's attention.

He doesn't yell at them; he just lays out the facts. He says, listen, Rome lets us be a free city, which comes with a lot of perks. An out-of-control riot is the quickest way to get the Romans to come in here and take all of that away.

And just like that, the fear of losing their special status was stronger than their rage. It worked. So after all that chaos, Paul knew he couldn't stay in Ephesus.

His time there was done. But before he left, he called together the leaders of the Christian community for one last, very emotional goodbye. And what he tells them is just chilling.

He basically says, look, the biggest threat you're going to face isn't going to be from riots or the government. The real danger is going to come from the inside, from people right here among you who will twist the truth to get power. But he didn't just leave them with a warning.

He gave them a positive example. He points to his own life, how he worked, how he sacrificed, how he served them, and says, this is the blueprint. This is what leadership looks like.

Protect the people you're leading. Don't use them. And this final scene is so powerful because it shows us the other side of the coin.

Yeah, this guy caused riots and public chaos wherever he went, but he also inspired this incredible deep love and loyalty. They're all there weeping, hugging him goodbye, not just

because a leader was leaving, but because they felt like they were losing a true friend. When you look at Paul's journey, it's pretty clear that powerful new ideas can absolutely change the world, but it almost never happens without a fight, without a cost.

And it kind of leaves you with a big question to chew on, right? What convictions do you have that are worth facing a riot for? What do you believe in so strongly that you'd be willing to stand for it, no matter how hard the world pushes back?