

Dr. Craig Keener, Acts, Session 21, Acts 21-22

6-Min. Video Overview

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Let's talk about a mission of peace that ends in a full-blown, city-wide riot. An apostle arrested by the very people he traveled so far to help. We're going to break down the explosive events around the Apostle Paul's arrest in Jerusalem.

And with some help from the scholar Dr. Craig Keener, we'll dig into the really deep-seated tensions that set the whole stage for chaos. So, this is the central question, isn't it? This is the paradox of Paul's whole journey. He feels this divine push to go to Jerusalem.

But with every single step he takes, it seems like that same divine source is warning him, hey, there's life-threatening danger ahead. So, what do you do? What do you do when your calling and the warnings are coming from the exact same place? You see, Paul's trip to Jerusalem wasn't just some casual pilgrimage. No, it was a collision course.

Right from the very start, the whole journey was just shadowed by this sense of dread, as believers he met along the way kept getting these very specific spiritual warnings about the fate that was waiting for him. When he gets to the port city of Tyre, the message he gets is direct and, honestly, pretty chilling. Fellow believers, speaking through the Spirit, are flat-out telling him not to go.

And this wasn't just, you know, some friendly advice. They were convinced this warning about some very real danger was coming straight from God. Okay, but here's where Dr. Keener points out a really crucial detail.

It's not that the prophecies were wrong. Oh no, danger was absolutely waiting for Paul in Jerusalem. The thing is, they only revealed part of the message.

Paul, because of his direct calling, understood the bigger picture: that the suffering wasn't something to run away from, but was actually a necessary part of his mission. And then things get even more dramatic. In Caesarea, a prophet named Agabus comes along and basically performs a piece of prophetic street theater.

He grabs Paul's belt, ties up his own hands and feet with it, and then declares a message from the Holy Spirit: the guy who owns this belt is going to be bound just like this and handed over. It was so vivid, so terrifying, that everybody, including Paul's own travel buddy Luke, was begging him to turn back. But Paul, he just presses on.

And he arrives in a city that is, for all intents and purposes, a powder keg waiting to explode. Tensions with Rome are incredibly high, nationalist zeal is on the rise, and in this kind of atmosphere, Paul is seen as a deeply suspicious figure. Now you got to understand, the Jerusalem church wasn't some small fringe group.

It was massive. We're talking tens of thousands of believers. And what's really important here is that their faith was deeply, deeply tied to their Jewish identity.

They were zealous for the law, which means their entire lives were shaped by the customs of Moses. So you can imagine how Paul's mission to non-Jews might feel like a direct threat to their entire heritage. And this is the kind of stuff they were hearing about him.

These rumors, as Dr. Keener points out, were just gross exaggerations. Paul never, ever told Jews to abandon their customs. He just argued that Gentiles didn't need to become Jewish to follow Jesus.

But you know how it is in a polarized environment. All that nuance gets lost, and Paul gets painted as an enemy of the people. So to try and fight back against these rumors, James, who is the leader of the Jerusalem church, comes up with a plan.

It's basically a public relations move. He asks Paul to perform this very public act of Jewish piety. By sponsoring four men who are finishing a special religious vow and paying for all their temple rights, Paul could show everyone, in a way they couldn't deny, that he still honored the law of Moses.

It was a really smart, strategic plan. But in a city this tense, even a plan for peace can totally backfire. All it was going to take was one false assumption, one tiny spark, to ignite the entire powder keg.

And look at how fast this all explodes. First, Paul's opponents see him out in the city with a guy named Trophimus, who's a Gentile. Later, they see Paul in the temple, by himself.

But they just leap to a conclusion, a false one, that he must have brought the Gentile inside with him. They start shouting, accusing him of defiling the holy place. And that's it.

That's the spark. The lie spreads like wildfire, and a mob comes together with one goal. Kill Paul.

Okay, so to really understand why this accusation was so incredibly explosive, we have to kind of zoom out from the physical chaos of the riot and look at the profound theological idea at the very heart of this whole conflict. This wasn't just some polite boundary line. The temple had a literal wall, a physical barrier separating the area where Gentiles could go from the inner courts, which were reserved only for Jews.

And archaeologists have actually found the warning signs from this wall. They essentially said, Gentiles, if you cross this line, you will have only yourself to blame for your own immediate death. It was the ultimate symbol of ethnic and religious separation built right into the architecture.

And that is why Paul's message was so earth-shattering. Later on, when he's writing to the believers in Ephesus, which, by the way, is the same city his accusers were from, he declares that in Christ, that very wall, that ultimate symbol of hostility, has been completely and utterly demolished. Dr. Keener really boils Paul's theology down into this powerful comparison right here.

On one hand, you have the old temple, made of stone, designed to segregate people based on purity laws. But Paul was teaching that God's new dwelling place, the new temple, wasn't a building at all. It was made of people, Jews and Gentiles, united together by faith.

This was the theological revolution that was really at the heart of the riot. So, keeping that radical idea in mind, let's jump back into the chaos in the temple courtyard. Roman soldiers have just rescued Paul from the mob, and in a move that is just stunning, he gets permission to speak to the very people who were trying to kill him just moments before.

He speaks to them in their shared language, Aramaic. He lays out all his credentials as a zealous Jew. And they're listening.

They're quiet. They're intent. Right up until he mentions that God sent him away from Jerusalem, quote, to the Gentiles.

And that one word is all it takes. It confirms all their worst fears, and the riot just explodes all over again. The Roman commander, he's totally confused and just desperate for answers, so he orders Paul to be interrogated under torture.

But as the soldiers are tying him up, getting the scourge ready, Paul plays his final card. He just calmly asks the centurion in charge a simple but absolutely devastating legal question. While the tribune rushes over, demanding to know if he's really a citizen, Paul delivers the line that changes absolutely everything.

You see, the tribune admits he had to buy his citizenship for a huge amount of money. But Paul? I was born a citizen, and in that single moment, the entire power dynamic shifts. Paul isn't just some troublemaker from the provinces.

He is a Roman, and he has rights that they cannot ignore. His journey to judgment has just begun, but now it's going to be on Rome's terms, not the mob's.