

Dr. Craig Keener, Acts, Session 22, Acts 23-26

6-Min. Video Overview

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Alright, let's get right into it. We're about to take a famous historical account and look at it for what it really is: a genuine, high-stakes legal thriller. You've got this one man, the Apostle Paul, who has to use every single trick in the book to survive not one, but two powerful legal systems: the Roman courts and the Jewish Sanhedrin.

And his story, well, it gives us an incredible window into the clash between a brand new faith and the most powerful empire on earth. And that really brings us to the core question of this whole situation. I mean, think about it.

Paul is in Jerusalem. He's a Roman prisoner, sure, but his real enemies are the religious leaders running the city. The Romans just want to figure out what to charge him with.

But for the court Paul's about to face, the verdict is already in. They want him gone. So how on earth do you win a trial like that? So here's where it all kicks off.

Paul is brought before the Sanhedrin. Think of it as the Supreme Court and Congress for the Jewish people all rolled into one. The Roman commander who brought him there is probably expecting a nice, orderly legal proceeding.

He could not have been more wrong. Paul barely gets a sentence out before the whole thing just goes completely off the rails. The high priest himself, a guy named Ananias, who had a really nasty reputation for corruption, just orders a guard to strike Paul right on the mouth.

Now, this wasn't just a slap. It was a massive public insult, and it was a totally illegal move for a judge to make. But Paul? He doesn't even flinch.

He fires right back with this incredible line. God will strike you, you whitewashed wall. Now, this isn't just some random insult.

He's actually quoting the prophet Ezekiel. He's basically calling the most powerful man in the room a hypocrite, someone who looks clean and righteous on the outside but is corrupt and rotting on the inside. And, get this, history tells us Ananias was, in fact, assassinated years later.

A pretty chillingly accurate prediction. Okay, to understand Paul's next move, which is absolutely brilliant, you need a little inside info on the court. The Sanhedrin was split into two rival groups, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and they absolutely could not stand each other, especially over one huge theological issue, the resurrection of the dead.

Paul, who was raised as a Pharisee, knew this was their biggest weakness. And this is where Paul plays his trump card. He shouts out for the whole court to hear that the real reason he's on trial is that he believes in the resurrection.

In one sentence, he completely reframes the entire case. Suddenly, this isn't about him causing a riot. No, now it's about the one belief that the Pharisees in the room hold most dear.

He literally turns his accusers against each other. And the result is immediate. The entire court just explodes into chaos.

The Pharisees suddenly jump to Paul's defense, yelling that maybe an angel spoke to him, while the Sadducees are just enraged. The argument gets so heated, so violent that the Roman commander has to order his soldiers to charge in and physically drag Paul out of there before he gets torn to pieces. And just like that, Paul has won.

He's turned a criminal trial into a religious squabble, which is something Rome wants absolutely nothing to do with. But here's the thing. Outsmarting the court in spectacular fashion didn't make Paul safe.

In fact, it just made his enemies more desperate. And when the legal system fails them, they decide to turn to straight-up violence. The plan they cook up is simple, but it's incredibly deadly.

First, they'll get their friends on the council to request another hearing with Paul. Then, while he's being escorted from the Roman fortress along a predictable narrow route, bam, a surprise ambush. It was basically a suicide mission, but these guys were so fanatical, they were more than willing to do it.

And we're not talking about a small handful of guys either. We're talking more than 40 men. 40.

And they all took a sacred oath that they would not eat or drink anything until Paul was dead. That's the level of intensity he was up against. But you know, the problem with secret plots is that they're really hard to keep secret.

And in an incredible twist of fate, Paul's own nephew happens to overhear the whole plan. Think about the courage this must have taken. He runs straight to the Roman fortress, manages to get an audience with the commander, and blows the whole conspiracy wide open.

One conversation changed everything. Now, the Roman response to this threat was just overwhelming. The commander Claudius Lysias took this incredibly seriously.

To get Paul out of the city safely, he put together a massive escort. 200 infantry soldiers, 70 cavalry on horseback, and another 200 spearmen. That is a 470-man armed guard for a single prisoner.

It just goes to show you how seriously the empire took protecting the rights and the life of a Roman citizen. Alright, new scene. Paul is now in the coastal city of Caesarea, under the watchful eye of the Roman governor, a man named Antonius Felix.

So you'd think, okay, finally, a real Roman court. A proper trial. Paul's a citizen.

He should get a fair hearing. Well, he's about to find out that in this court, justice has a price. So the prosecution hires this slick lawyer who lays out all the charges.

But Paul? He's a master. He just calmly and logically dismantles every single accusation. Accused of causing riots? He says, you have absolutely no proof.

Leader of a dangerous sect? Nope, I just worship the god of our ancestors. Same as you. And then he delivers the knockout blow.

Accused of desecrating the temple? Okay, then where are my accusers? The guys who actually saw me do this? They didn't even show up. Under Roman law, that should have been an immediate dismissal. But Paul doesn't just argue the facts.

He also makes this brilliant appeal to what the ancient Greeks called ethos. It's all about establishing your own character and credibility. He tells the governor that the only reason he was in Jerusalem in the first place was to bring charity, money for the poor.

He paints himself not as a troublemaker, but as a benefactor, a good guy getting a raw deal. And you know what? Governor Felix totally gets it. He knows Paul is innocent.

But Felix was also famously corrupt, so what does he do? He just leaves Paul to rot in prison for two full years. He keeps calling Paul in for these little chats, hoping that eventually Paul's friends would scrape together a massive bribe to buy his freedom. So, two years go by.

The corrupt governor Felix is out, and a new governor, Porcius Festus, is in. And right around this time, a very important guest comes to visit: King Agrippa II. The stage is now set for the absolute climax of Paul's legal journey.

Now, this new governor, Festus, is completely confused by this case he's inherited, so he asks King Agrippa, who actually understands Jewish customs, for his opinion. For Paul, this isn't just another legal hearing. This is the moment he's been waiting for.

This is his chance to share his message before kings, and he absolutely seizes it. Paul gives this powerful, passionate speech, telling his whole life story and building up to his belief in the resurrection. Well, the Roman governor, Festus, just can't take it.

He's totally bewildered. He actually shouts out, Paul, you're crazy! All that reading has driven you insane! He can see Paul is brilliant, but he thinks his beliefs are just madness. But King Agrippa's reaction is completely different.

He actually gets the context, and Paul turns to him directly, putting him on the spot. Agrippa is so visibly shaken and intrigued that he says, "Whoa, in a little while, you could persuade me to become a Christian. He can see the power and the logic in what Paul is saying.

So, after that incredible hearing, the officials all meet in private. It's decision time. What are they finally going to do about Paul? And their conclusion is unanimous.

It's crystal clear. King Agrippa turns to the governor and says, this man is doing nothing that deserves death or prison. He could have been set free.

And there it is, the big twist. To save himself from a biased trial back in Jerusalem, Paul had used his ultimate right as a Roman citizen. He appealed his case directly to the emperor in Rome.

And that one single legal move that saved his life now prevents his freedom. His case is officially out of their hands. It has to go to Caesar.

And that's where the story leaves us. Paul, a prisoner, on his way to Rome. So it begs the final question, right? Was that appeal to Caesar the ultimate checkmate? A genius move that guaranteed him a Roman-escorted journey to preach at the very heart of the empire? Or was it a fatal miscalculation? A move that locked him into a legal process that would ultimately lead to his death? A strategic masterstroke? Or a tragic mistake? What do you think?