

## WHAT IS THE NOISE ALL ABOUT?

**Today's Text:** Acts Chaps 25-26

### **Extracts:**

**And when [Governor Festus] had remained [in Jerusalem] among [the chief men of the Jews] more than ten days, he went down to Caesarea. And the next day, sitting on the judgment seat, he commanded Paul to be brought. When he had come, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood about and laid many serious charges against Paul, which they could not prove... But Festus, wanting to do the Jews a favour, answered Paul and said, "Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and there be judged before me concerning these things?" So Paul said, "I stand at Caesar's judgment seat, where I ought to be judged. To the Jews I have done no wrong, as you well know... I appeal to Caesar." Then Festus, when he had conferred with the council, answered, "You have appealed to Caesar? To Caesar you shall go!" [Acts 26: 6-12]**

*In October 2002, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague ruled that Bakassi on the south-east coast of Nigeria belonged to the Cameroun Republic.<sup>1</sup> Nigeria was given a window of 10 years to appeal the ruling if she had new evidence for the case to be reopened. However, as October 2012 approached, there was an unprecedented wave of agitation for the Bakassi case to be reopened. It was spearheaded by politicians and journalists from that part of Nigeria. But as soon as the Federal Government ruled the Bakassi case closed, the agitation died down. What was the noise all about? It could be traced to the fact that, with the loss of oil-rich Bakassi to the Cameroun and off-shore oil wells to the neighbouring Akwa-Ibom State (by a Supreme Court ruling), the Cross River State has become the only non-oil producing Niger Delta State in Nigeria!*

*As you look around your world, you will hear so much noise of contention- at home, work, school or place of worship. What is the commotion all about? How can you remain focused without being distracted by it? In this week's Bible story, we find Paul being tried several times on the same charges. What was the noise all about? Let us learn a few principles from the story for our sanity.*

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<sup>1</sup> Story is based on the following sources: Johnbosco Agbakwuru, "Bakassi: Reps to revisit ICJ judgment," Aug. 12, 2012; <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2012/08/bakassi-reps-to-revisit-icj-judgment/> ; Clara Nwachukwu, "Imoke urges political solution to Bakassi, oil block losses," Sept. 20, 2012; <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2012/09/imoke-urges-political-solution-to-bakassi-oil-block-losses/>; and Hugo Odiogor, "Bakassi people sue FG," Oct. 17, 2012; <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2012/10/bakassi-people-sue-fg/>

## 1. Background: A case of Double Jeopardy!

In law, *when a person is prosecuted a second time for something that s(he) has already been tried for, it is called double jeopardy*. It is outlawed in many countries where they practise the rule of law. We have followed the trial of Paul over the past few weeks in this series. We recall his first trial in the hands of the mob soon after he had been seized in the temple in Jerusalem. They beat him up even before he could defend himself [Acts 21: 27-30]. As they were about to kill him, Roman soldiers intervened and brought him bound to their commander [vv. 31-40]. Under Roman protection, Paul defended himself by recalling the story of his conversion on the road to Damascus. The mob was not impressed but wanted him killed. On knowing that he was a Roman citizen, the commander insisted on a formal trial. He removed the bonds and commanded the Jewish leaders to give Paul a fair hearing before the Sanhedrin [Acts 22: 1-30]. Let us call that the first trial.

Paul perceived that he was facing a hostile jury in the hands of the high priest and other members of the council. So, he put a wedge between the Pharisees (who believed in the resurrection of the dead) and the Sadducees (who did not) by proclaiming that he was being persecuted for preaching the resurrection of the dead! When the Romans saw that a Roman citizen's life was in danger, they removed Paul by night and took him to Caesarea, the seat of power of the Roman governor, Felix. The governor asked the Jewish leaders to come for Paul's trial before him [Acts 23: 1-35].

Five days later, the chief priest and other Jewish elders came before the Roman governor to prosecute Paul. They hired an eloquent orator, Tertullus, to represent them. After Paul had made his defence, the governor adjourned the case indefinitely without passing judgment! In fact, after two years, nothing happened. Felix was transferred and replaced by a new governor, Festus. Meanwhile, Paul remained in prison [Acts 24: 1-27]. Would you not call that another trial for the same 'offence'?

This week's study deals with Paul's third trial for the same charge. Festus had received a petition concerning Paul from the high priest and the chief men of the Jews during his visit to the province. They asked him a favour to bring Paul to Jerusalem for trial. Festus turned down their request but, instead, insisted that they should come to Caesarea to make their case against Paul. After ten days in Jerusalem, Felix returned to Caesarea [Acts 25: 1-6]. Let us follow how this trial went:

### a) *Paul's trial is reopened by Festus*

Festus sat on his judgment seat and asked Paul to be brought before him. What followed is quite familiar:

- *The charges were the same*- complaints against Paul which the Jewish leaders could not prove [v. 7];
- *Paul's defence was also familiar*- neither against the law of the Jews nor the temple nor against Caesar had he offended in anything at all [v. 8];
- *Festus' ruling had a ring of familiarity*- he prevaricated just like his predecessor, Felix. Wanting to do a favour for the Jews, he asked Paul, "Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and there be judged before me concerning these things?" [v. 9].

b) *So exactly what is going on?*

I can imagine Paul's shock and anger as if to say, "What's going on here?" Why would Festus need to move the trial to Jerusalem where he would also be the judge? What new evidence did he need to have before he was in a position to pass his judgment? What was the noise all about?

It was at that stage that Paul decided to exercise his legal options. He said to the Roman governor, "I stand at Caesar's judgment seat, where I ought to be judged. To the Jews I have done no wrong, as you very well know. For if I am an offender, or have committed anything deserving of death, I do not object to dying; but if there is nothing in these things of which these men accuse me, no one can deliver me to them. I appeal to Caesar." Paul had put the matter beyond the provincial governor's jurisdiction; he had appealed to the emperor in Rome. So, after consulting with the council, Festus ruled, "You have appealed to Caesar? To Caesar you shall go!" [vv. 10-12].

The rest of the story was all noise! Festus was confused because he could not send a prisoner on appeal when he did not know what charge to put on the appeal documents! When King Agrippa and his wife, Bernice, came to Caesarea to visit him, he tried to launder his conscience by presenting Paul's case before them. Agrippa offered to hear from Paul and he was obliged the following day [vv. 13-27]. Paul recounted the same old story of his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus (for the second time in a few weeks!) and how he was being persecuted by the Jews for remaining faithful to his calling [Acts 26: 1-29]. After hearing it all, King Agrippa conferred secretly with Festus and *both of them agreed that Paul had done nothing deserving of chains or death. Agrippa then said to Festus, "This man might have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar"* [vv. 30-32].

If Paul had not appealed to Rome, his chains and threat to life would have remained. But now that he had appealed, they had no charges to frame against him! So, what was all the loud noise about? There is much more to it than meets the eye.

## 2. A profile of Noise Makers

Noise-making is a way of life to most of us. We are either contributors or receivers of noise. I am referring here to contentions, rumour-peddling or character assassination. Among the seven abominations that God hates are a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that are swift in running to evil, a false witness who speaks lies and a person who sows discord among brethren [**Prov. 6: 16-19**]. We are prosecutors and judges in cases involving those we hate or envy. Exactly what is all the noise about?

After all the noise concerning Paul, the governor could not find charges with which to send him as a prisoner to Rome! But *we know that the bottom line was his gospel message. The Jews did not want to hear it; the Romans wanted to kill it; but no one was bold or able enough to frame it that way!* So, if you want to understand the noise concerning your promotion at work or success in marriage, ministry or studies, you need to know the profile of the noise makers around you. Some of them are as follows:

### a) *The cannon fodder*

The bulk of the noise-makers are people who are being used without their realizing it. They are part of *the crowd attracted to a developing event*. They may not have the time or the means to know what is going on but they are worked into a frenzy to serve as the cannon fodder- *the firewood to light the flame to consume the object of the noise*. They are exploited and in the end may be sacrificed.

Take the case of the crowd that the scribes and Pharisees had worked up to cast stones at the woman caught in adultery. Imagine if that woman had not been brought to Jesus. The noise of her accusation drew the crowd around her. Judgment of death by stoning could have followed without any trial or fair hearing. Thank God that Jesus was there! When He challenged anyone of them without sin to cast the first stone, we are told, “those who heard it, being convicted by their conscience, went out one by one, beginning with the oldest even to the last [and] Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst” [**Jn 8: 1-9**].

That disturbing news flash that you are hearing about your most trusted friend could be a false alarm being raised by your detractors to break you up. Therefore, read between the lines. It takes fire extinguishers to put out fire. So, do not be anybody’s cannon fodder.

### b) *The contractor*

Some people play the contractor *by taking on the responsibility of driving the noise for pay or mischief*. They may be in a position to serve as the

medium or the executor of an evil scheme hatched by your enemies or detractors. For example, those terrorists that are bombing churches in predominantly Muslim parts of Northern Nigeria may actually be mere contractors used by faceless sponsors and financiers. The unfavourable series of articles you are reading about the organization that you are running could have been written by contractors sponsored by those who had lost out in the contract bidding or promotion exercise. Therefore, unless you know one from the other, you could be cutting down the wrong tree!

Take the case of Jezebel, the wife of King Ahab of Israel. The king had asked Naboth to sell him his vineyard that was next to the palace for a vegetable garden. Naboth refused because that was his inheritance from his ancestors. When the king complained about it to his wife, she promised to get it for him. She contrived a murderous plot against the innocent man by getting two scoundrels to lie against him. One day, she organized an event in honour of Naboth. The two false witnesses came out before the people to claim that they had heard Naboth blaspheme God and the king. He was immediately taken outside and stoned to death. After his death, Jezebel the contractor handed over the vineyard to her husband free of charge [1 Kgs 21: 1-16].

The noise you may be hearing about you could be the voice of Jacob but the hand of Esau! Therefore, learn to read between the lines so that you are not misled to treat the symptoms as the cause.

c) *The proprietor*

The brains behind the noise may be faceless. You may not be able to trace the funding to their bank accounts. Their fingerprints do not show up anywhere. Yet, they are the proprietors behind the noise! ***They are the beneficiaries.*** For example, petrol (gas) stations in some Nigerian cities began to experience long queues since the law enforcement agencies arrested suspected prominent oil subsidy scammers. The noise you are hearing is that oil importers are refusing to bring in supplies because government had stopped or delayed paying subsidies to them. There is much more to it than meets the eye!

Take the example of Demetrius, a silversmith at Ephesus, who saw Paul's mission as a threat to his trade. The silver shrines of the Greek goddess, Diana, which he and his colleagues made "brought no small profit to the craftsmen." He called his colleagues together to draw their attention to the danger of Paul's gospel. To make the matter marketable to the general public, he sold the idea that Paul came to show disrespect to Diana "whom all Asia and the world worship." Ephesus "was filled with confusion, and [people] rushed into the theatre with one accord." Most of them were

confused and “did not know why they had come together.” But for the timely intervention of the city clerk, that noise could have endangered the lives of Paul and his travel companions [Acts 19: 23-41]. But how many people in that crowd knew that Demetrius and his fellow craftsmen were the sponsors of that disturbance? So, be careful!

*In spite of all the noise, Paul knew who he was and where he was going.* The Lord had told him, “Be of good cheer, Paul; for as you have testified for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome” [Acts 23: 11]. With that in mind, when Festus offered for him to be taken back to Jerusalem for an umpteenth trial, Paul replied with audacity, “I appeal to Caesar” [Acts 25: 11]. Caesar lived in Rome. That was where the Lord asked Paul to take the gospel. Church history confirms that Paul and Peter put the gospel of Christ on Vatican Hill, which is today the seat of the oldest and largest Christian denomination in the whole world- the Roman Catholic Church.

### **3. Conclusion: Focus on the ball, not on the dribbler!**

*That noise may be about you but it is not for you.* Your enemy may make a great deal of noise, just like Satan walking about like a roaring lion, seeking whom to devour [1 Pet. 5: 8]. Your detractor may be seeking to hide the ball of truth and dribble it out of your reach but your goal at all times must be to focus on the ball, not on the dribbler! Be a truth monger, not a rumourmonger. Do not be deceived by other people’s gifts and talents; instead, focus on the fruits of their Christian faith.

Go to Jesus, the way, the truth and the life [Jn 14: 6]; look unto Him who is the author and finisher of your faith [Heb. 12: 2]. In Him, you will have peace; in the world, you will have tribulation. But be of good cheer; He has overcome the world [Jn 16: 33]!