

YOU CAN BEAT A HOSTILE JURY!

Today's Text: Acts Chaps. 22, 23

Extracts:

The next day, because [the Roman commander] wanted to know for certain why [Paul] was accused by the Jews, he released him from his bonds, and commanded the chief priests and all their council to appear, and brought Paul down and set him before them. Then Paul, looking earnestly at the council, said, "Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day." And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth. Then Paul said to him, "God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! For you sit to judge me according to the law, and do you command me to be struck contrary to the law?"... But the following night the Lord stood by him and said, "Be of good cheer, Paul; for as you have testified for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome" [Acts 22: 30-23: 11]

The US Constitution requires all those seeking the office of the President to be natural-born citizens.¹ Since President Obama first sought that office in 2008, a movement, popularly known as the "birthers" has refused to accept irrefutable evidence that he is a natural-born American. Even when he had to release the long-form birth certificate in April 2011, confirming his birth in the State of Hawaii, the birthers are not convinced. Recently, a Joe Montgomery filed a petition before the Kansas State Objections Board, dominated by Republican Party elected officials, to remove President Obama from the ballot for the November 6, 2012 Presidential Elections! At the hearing to consider the objection, neither Obama nor the Democratic Party showed up. But on 14 September 2012, Montgomery withdrew his petition "in response to public reaction."

The birthers represent a hostile jury to President Obama because no matter what evidence he presents, they can never be convinced. Yet, he has beaten them each time because he has advocates- Americans- who believe in upholding the truth. We can find ourselves in a similar situation in real life. For example, some people may hold an opinion about you which no facts that you place before them can change. Are you going to give up? If not, how do you hope to beat them? In this week's Bible story, Paul was brought for trial before a hostile Jewish council that beat him up even before hearing from him. Yet, he prevailed. We can learn something from the story to enable us to deal with our own circumstances. This week's study may be for you!

¹ Story based on Brian Montopoli & Phil Hirschhorn, "Kansas Republicans: We need to see Obama's birth certificate," *CBS News*/ September 14, 2012; http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-503544_162-57513244-503544/kansas-republicans-we-need-to-see-obamas-birth-certificate/

1. Background: Paul is tried by a hostile jury

We all are in one form of trial or another each new day. It is not necessarily in a law court. Some of us are being tried *in the court of public opinion- in a gossip magazine or rumour mill in the family, church, office or business*. Some people specialise in matters concerning running us down even when they cannot spot us out in an identity parade! At the head of their pack is Satan himself, “the accuser of our brethren” who accuses us before our God “day and night” [Rev. 12: 10]. But must you fear them or keep trying to vindicate yourself? The answer is No in both cases. *To fear them is to make them relish giving you hell. To defend yourself is futile because, as an African proverb has put it, a cockroach can never get justice in a court of cockerels! But you can still beat them. This week’s study will address your concerns in this area of your life and assure you that your victory shall be total in Jesus’ name!*

The Bible story comes from Paul’s trial before the Jewish council on his final return to Jerusalem from his third missionary journey to the Gentiles. Before his arrival, the Holy Spirit had revealed through several prophets that he was going to face hard times in Jerusalem. Little did he know that he would not even get one day of rest before his ordeals would begin. At his very first appearance in the temple, the Jews from Asia spotted him and stirred up the whole crowd who laid hands on him, screaming, “Men of Israel, help! This is the man who teaches *all men everywhere against the people, the law, and this place*; and furthermore he also brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place” [Acts 21: 26-28]. All men? Everywhere? Against the people? Against the law? Against this place? In a court of law, such charges would be hard to prove beyond reasonable doubt. But, even hearing Paul’s side of the story, they laid hands on him and did not stop beating him until they saw Roman soldiers and their commander [vv. 29-32]. Let us follow his trial from there:

a) *The Jury in Paul’s case*

The hastily assembled jury was made up of *an assortment of people united by their common hatred of the accused*. It consisted of:

- The *Jewish council* led by Ananias the high priest [Acts 23: 2]. It had been behind all the persecutions against the early church, including the trial and imprisonment of some apostles who were set free by angels [Acts 5: 17-32], and the stoning of Stephen to death [Acts 8: 12-15, 54-59]. In spite of the wise counsel given them by Gamaliel, a highly respected teacher of the law (and Paul’s ‘college professor’), that they could not overthrow the work of the disciples of Jesus if it was of God [Acts 5:33-39], the council members were not about to give up even a losing fight.
- Some of the council members had deeper motives beyond upholding the Law of Moses. Among them were the *Sadducees*

who believed that there was neither resurrection nor angels and the **Pharisees** who confessed both [Acts 23: 6-8].

- The commander of the **Roman soldiers** who ordered Paul bound with thongs and scourged was infected by the emotional contagion of the unruly crowd that he saw beating up an ‘accused.’ Due process was an essential part of Roman law but the soldiers were more interested in maintenance of peace than upholding of human rights under the law.

With that kind of hostile jury, how could Paul get a fair hearing? Are you then surprised that the panel set up by your church to attempt to reconcile you with your pastor over your spouse is headed by the very person fueling the crisis? Was Potiphar not the judge and jury in the case of Mrs. Potiphar’s allegation of attempted rape against Joseph [Gen. 39: 15-20]?

b) *Paul’s defence*

Paul’s defence was two-pronged. First, he began with ***an eloquent testimony about his own conversion***. He was a zealous Pharisee that had “persecuted this Way [of Christ] to the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women,” [Acts 22: 3-4] and consenting to the death of Stephen, even “guarding the clothes of those who [killed] him” [v. 20]. However, his encounter with Jesus on the way to Damascus had changed all that [vv. 5-16]. It was Jesus the Christ who specifically told him to “make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly” because the Jewish leaders would not receive his testimony concerning Him. Jesus told him, “Depart, for I will send you far from here to the Gentiles” [vv. 17-21].

Did he impress the hostile jury with that factual testimony? Not at all! Instead, they raised their voices, saying, “Away with such a fellow from the earth, for he is not fit to live!” [v. 22]. Is that not a death sentence without proof of guilt? The Romans who had the authority to carry out such a sentence took over from there. They were about to drag Paul into their barracks when he set in motion ***his sense of perception***. He questioned the soldiers’ right to punish a Roman citizen without due process! As soon as the commander knew of that, he “wanted to know for certain why [Paul] was accused by the Jews.” He removed the ‘handcuffs’ and released Paul. Then he commanded the chief priests and all members of their council to hold a formal court hearing on Paul’s case [vv. 24-30].

Paul had hardly said a word when the chief priest Ananias ordered his orderlies to strike him in the mouth [Acts 23: 1-2]. It was then it dawned on him that his Roman citizenship was not going to work among his fellow Jews. So, he tried something else. He decided to ***exploit the perennial conflict between the Pharisees and Sadducees on the question of resurrection***. So, raising his voice, Paul said, “Men and brethren, I am

a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee; concerning the hope of and resurrection of the dead I am being judged!” Immediately, “a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees; and the assembly was divided [vv. 6-7]. The Pharisees among the council members said, “We find no evil in this man; but if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him, let us not fight against God.” The commander, fearing for the life of a Roman citizen sent soldiers down there to take him by force and bring him into the barracks [vv. 9-10]!

That is a remarkable and happy ending to a troubling development, but was it because of Paul’s smartness? No. The night after Paul’s trial, the Lord Jesus stood by him and said to him, “Be of good cheer, Paul; for as you have testified for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome” [v. 11]. Indeed, events soon unfolded to propel Paul towards audience with Caesar in Rome. When a plot to kill Paul was leaked to the commander, he used a convoy of heavily armed soldiers [made up of 200 soldiers, 70 horsemen and 200 spearmen] to take him to Governor Felix at Caesarea where Paul was kept in protective custody in Herod’s Praetorium [vv. 12-35]!

Indeed, Jesus while on earth told His disciples, “You will be brought before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles. But when they deliver you up, do not worry about how or what you should speak. For it will be given to you in that hour what you should speak; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you” [Matt. 10: 18-20]. We can, therefore, conclude that *Paul received help from above, not from his human prowess*. That is why the Psalmist has said that he looks up to the hill where his help comes from; it comes from the LORD who made heaven and earth [Ps. 121: 1-2].

2. How to defend yourself before a hostile jury

From the foregoing, we can learn the following key points to help us to defend ourselves before a hostile jury:

a) *You are not the one on trial but who/what you represent*

From the way the Jewish leaders’ case against Paul simply disappeared, it is clear that he was actually not the one on trial but who/what he represented. For example, the Lord commended him for testifying for Him before Jews and Gentiles. Therefore, it was Jesus Christ that was on trial. In like manner, you should as early as possible understand why you are facing such a hostile court of public opinion. Could it be envy? For example, Jesus was brought before Pontius Pilate out of envy [Matt. 27: 18]. Joseph’s brothers sold him into slavery out of envy [Gen. 37: 11].

Therefore, you must first establish what/who you represent. Examine yourself. Are you walking in the counsel of the ungodly? Do you sit in the path of sinners or sit in the seat of the scornful? You can easily attract a hostile jury against you for such things. But if your delight is in the law of God on which you meditate day and night, the fruits that you bear will certainly attract envy, especially if you do not use them to glorify God Himself. Therefore, like David when Saul was pursuing him to kill, learn to behave wisely at all times [1 Sam. 18: 14-15].

b) *Therefore, you can only win by sticking to that truth*

Paul's Roman citizenship or human wisdom could not buy him freedom. It was God's favour on him that did it. The favour came because he openly testified about the truth of Jesus to his hostile listeners. The word of God says, "When a man's ways please the LORD, He makes even his enemies to be at peace with him" [Prov. 16: 7]. ***It is better for you to be right than to attempt to be popular.*** To be right is to stick to the truth at all times; to be popular is to say what people want to hear, to be user-friendly. Be like Joshua and say with full divine assurance, "Fear the LORD, serve Him in sincerity and in truth ... and if it seems evil to you to serve the LORD, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve... But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD" [Josh. 24: 14-15].

c) *Forgive your detractors when you are vindicated*

If that jury is hostile against you because of who/what you represent, why do you think that Satan is not behind them against you? For example, when Jesus had been nailed to the cross, thus fulfilling the purpose of His coming in human form, He said, of His detractors, "Father, forgive them, ***for they do not know what they do***" [Lk 23: 34].

Paul makes this clearer when he wrote to the Corinthian church, "But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory, which none of the rulers of this age knew; for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory" [1 Cor. 2: 7-8]. The hostile jury against you may not know what it is doing. So, forgive its ignorance! That was why, as Stephen was about to die in the hands of those that stoned him to death, he looked up and saw the Son of Man, standing on the right hand of God. On his knees, Stephen cried out, saying, "Lord, Jesus, receive my spirit... Do not charge them with this sin" [Acts 7: 56-60]. Forgive your detractors and thus hand them over to God the Judge [Rom. 12: 19].

Just as a cockroach cannot win a case among hungry cockerels, do not expect to be vindicated among your detractors. So, do not fight on your own. Go to the One who alone can do it for you.

3. Conclusion: Make Jesus your Advocate!

The prophet Zechariah was shown in a vision Joshua the high priest “standing before the Angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right hand to oppose him.” Joshua was clothed in filthy garments. After rebuking Satan, the LORD said, “Take away the filthy garments from him.” Turning to Joshua, the LORD said, “See, I have removed your iniquity from you, and I will clothe you with rich robes” [**Zech. 3: 1-4**]. That same Satan remains the accuser of those who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus [**Rev. 12: 11, 17**]. Therefore, that hostile jury that is under Satan’s spell is still on your case!

But be of good cheer! We have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous [**1 Jn 2: 1**]. He will never leave you nor forsake you [**Heb. 13: 5**]. *Their attacks may be vicious. Their weapons may be deadly. But their plans against you have already been frustrated!* As you have given testimony of Jesus before them, so He will acknowledge you on the day that you show up at His judgment seat when He will say to you, “Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” [**Matt. 25: 34**].

Congratulations!