

THE TRIAL OF JESS GOODNUFF

*by David Leitzel, Marc Hamman,
and Jeff Keegan*



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CAST OF CHARACTERS

POLICEMAN — *A local police officer; may be male or female.*

JESS GOODNUFF — *A man in his early 30s.*

BAILIFF — *May be male or female.*

JUDGE — *Represents God.*

PROSECUTOR — *Represents Satan; always
overpronounces "s's".*

PAUL — *A co-worker of Jess'.*

AMY — *A woman in her 30s; Jess' wife.*

REVEREND — *Jess' pastor.*

MOM — *Jess' mother; a sweet, older lady.*

PUBLIC DEFENDER — *Represents Jesus.*

PRODUCTION NOTES

This production is most effective when it is highly personalized. Use real co-workers and family members of the actor playing Jess in the play, if possible. Your own pastor should play the part of "Reverend." Make sure Jess mispronounces his/her name (page 5, line 31). Using a local police officer (well-known to your congregation and community) works very well. You can even use a photograph of your "Jess" being led away in handcuffs as part of your promotional campaign.

Be sure that the character of Jess visibly progresses from over-confidence to absolute terror. His entire defense is based on the assumption that he is no worse than anyone else. Slowly it must dawn on him that the prosecutor's whole case is that he is no better than anyone else. His demeanor must visibly change as this becomes apparent to him.

The arrest in scene 1 should take place in the congregation, with Jess sitting toward the front so everyone can see without difficulty. It is fun to have the arrest interrupt the worship service. A taped siren just prior to the arrest is sure to grab everyone's attention. A wireless mike should be used on the arresting officer so the charges can be clearly heard by everyone. You might ask a pianist to play suspenseful-type music to bridge the two scenes. The courtroom setup should already be in place on your platform/chancel area for a smooth transition.

As the court-appointed attorney (Christ) is led away at the conclusion of the play, we found that a soft instrumental arrangement of "Jesus Loves Me" or "The Old Rugged Cross" is very effective.

Setting: A courtroom. The Judge's bench is in the middle. Two tables and chairs, one on each side and to the front of the Judge's bench, are for the prosecution and the defense (Jess). The defense table should have an extra chair for the public defender. The witness stand is next to the Judge's bench. The bailiff's chair is by the witness stand. Set up four chairs or a pew where the witnesses may be seated while awaiting their chance to testify.

Whatever you can do to create the illusion of a real courtroom will greatly enhance the drama. We created the Judge's bench and witness stand from inexpensive wood finished paneling and a framework of 2x2s or 2x4s. (You can improvise from existing

tables, chairs, or podiums if you don't want to tackle building.) Flags and water pitchers will add a nice touch to your courtroom. As most modern courts have microphones on the tables, miking the production was no problem. Just put your mikes right out in the open where you need them.

Costumes: Police Officer — Uniform.

Jess Goodnuff — In the first scene, Jess may be dressed informally — in a shirt with the sleeves rolled up, unbuttoned at the neck. By the second scene, Jess should be wearing a suit and tie and carrying a briefcase. (A jacket and a clip-on tie may quickly be added between scenes 1 and 2.)

Bailiff — Uniform or suit.

Judge — Large, black robe.

Prosecutor — Should be dressed in red and wear red sunglasses. Carries a briefcase.

Paul — “Working” clothes.

Amy — “Everyday” clothes.

Reverend — Suit, robe, or whatever he/she normally wears on Sunday.

Mom — Shawl, glasses, “old lady” print dress, cane.

Public Defender — May wear either a suit and tie or a biblical robe, sandals and headpiece.

Props: Handcuffs

Gavel

Bible

Handkerchief — Place on the witness stand. It stays there for all three witnesses to use.

Paper and pencils — Set on top of prosecution table.

Polaroid camera

Letter — Jess’ letter from Mom. Copy the letter on page 7, lines 6-11, on stationery.

Scene 1

(Scene opens with JESS sitting in the congregation — in the front pew, near an aisle. The POLICEMAN enters from the rear of the sanctuary and walks up the aisle, looking from side to side, as if searching for someone. He stops when he gets to JESS.)

POLICEMAN: Jess Goodnuff?

JESS: *(Standing)* Yes?

POLICEMAN: I have a warrant for your arrest.

JESS: What's the charge?

POLICEMAN: You've been charged under Romans, Article 6, Section 23: You are a known sinner and are continually falling short of God's desire for your life.

JESS: *(Dramatic pause with a slow look at congregation)* You've gotta be kidding me.

POLICEMAN: Mr. Goodnuff, I need to inform you of your rights. You have the right to remain silent. Everything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney. Since you cannot afford one, the court has appointed one for you. Do you understand these rights?

JESS: Yeah, yeah! I hear what you're saying. But I'm no sinner. If it's a sinner you want, why don't you arrest Kenny Kintz? *(Substitute a name known to your congregation.)* I'm no saint; but I'm sure no sinner!

POLICEMAN: Tell it to the judge! *(POLICEMAN handcuffs JESS and leads him Off-stage.)*

Scene 2

(Scene opens with BAILIFF, PROSECUTOR, JESS, PAUL, AMY, REVEREND and MOM seated in their places.)

BAILIFF: All rise! *(Everyone does so.)* Hear ye, hear ye! The Mighty One, God, the Lord, speaks and summons the

- 1 earth . . . He summons the heavens above and the earth
2 that he may judge his people. (*JUDGE enters and sits at his*
3 *desk.*)
- 4 **JUDGE:** Be seated. (*All sit except BAILIFF.*)
- 5 **BAILIFF:** Your Honor, the first case is "The State versus Jess
6 Goodnuff." Mr. Goodnuff is charged with being a known
7 sinner and continually falling short of God's desire for his
8 life.
- 9 **JUDGE:** How does the defendant plead?
- 10 **JESS:** (*Stands.*) Your Honor, I plead not guilty.
- 11 **JUDGE:** Excuse me, Mr. Goodnuff, but where is your defense
12 attorney?
- 13 **JESS:** Oh, well I kind of figured I'd defend myself.
- 14 **JUDGE:** You are aware that a public defender will be
15 provided if you so desire, aren't you?
- 16 **JESS:** Yeah, I know. Thanks, I won't need him.
- 17 **JUDGE:** Well, it's your decision. So that's your plea then? Not
18 guilty?
- 19 **JESS:** Not guilty! I intend to prove to the court that I am
20 basically a good guy. A nice person. Hey, at heart I'm no
21 worse than anybody else.
- 22 **JUDGE:** Mr. Goodnuff, are you *sure* you won't accept the
23 public defender's help?
- 24 **JESS:** I don't need anyone's help.
- 25 **JUDGE:** (*To congregation*) Let me instruct everyone that the
26 burden of proof lies with the Prosecutor. To succeed in
27 his case, he must prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that
28 Mr. Goodnuff is a sinner. However, if he succeeds in doing
29 this, the court will have no choice but to find the defendant
30 guilty as charged and to punish him to the full extent of
31 the law. (*To the PROSECUTOR*) Is the prosecution ready?
- 32 **PROSECUTOR:** (*Like a snake*) Yesss!
- 33 **JUDGE:** Is the defense ready?
- 34 **JESS:** Yo!
- 35 **JUDGE:** You may call your first witness.

- 1 **JESS:** The defense calls Mr. Paul Hilkey. *(PAUL steps up to the*
 2 *witness stand, places left hand on BAILIFF's Bible, and raises*
 3 *right hand for the swearing in.)*
- 4 **BAILIFF:** Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and
 5 nothing but the truth, so help you God?
- 6 **PAUL:** I do.
- 7 **JESS:** Paul, tell the court how long you've worked with me.
- 8 **PAUL:** About ten years.
- 9 **JESS:** And in that time, you've seen the quality of work I do?
- 10 **PAUL:** Uh . . . yeah, sure! I've seen your work.
- 11 **JESS:** And isn't it true that I'm one of the most conscientious
 12 men you have ever worked with, that I *only* do top-quality
 13 work?
- 14 **PAUL:** Oh, yeah! Right! *(Turns to JUDGE as he speaks.)* Jess
 15 always does real good work. I remember one time he got
 16 mad at the foreman because he asked us to work some
 17 overtime. Jess threw his hammer, he kicked a toolbox, he
 18 screamed at me and cussed out a ladder . . . but in spite
 19 of all that, he still did real good work the whole time.
- 20 **JESS:** Uh . . . Thank you, no further questions.
- 21 **PAUL:** Take my word, you can count on Jess to always do a
 22 good job for you. He may scream and throw temper
 23 tantrums, but he always does a job right.
- 24 **JESS:** You may step down.
- 25 **PAUL:** He may grumble and gripe and be in a bad mood all
 26 day; I know he can be a royal jerk, but he *always* does
 27 real good work.
- 28 **JESS:** Objection! I move to strike!
- 29 **JUDGE:** You wish to have the witness's testimony stricken
 30 from the record?
- 31 **JESS:** No, I wish to strike the witness across his big, fat mouth!
 32 *(JESS starts after PAUL, the BAILIFF holds him back and the*
 33 *PROSECUTOR whips out a Polaroid and snaps a shot of the*
 34 *whole scene.)*
- 35 **PROSECUTOR:** Aha! Your Honor, I would like to have this

1 entered as People's exhibit number 666 for the
 2 prosecution.

3 JUDGE: Do you have any further questions for this witness?

4 JESS: No, Your Honor.

5 JUDGE: Does the Prosecutor wish to cross-examine?

6 PROSECUTOR: Yesss! Mr. Hilkey! Let me just clarify one
 7 little point in your testimony. Are you telling us that Jess
 8 Goodnuff is basically a good guy?

9 PAUL: Right! *(The PROSECUTOR starts to lean into the witness*
 10 *who starts to back away in the stand.)*

11 PROSECUTOR: That he's essentially a nice person?

12 PAUL: Yeah!

13 PROSECUTOR: At heart, he's no different than anybody else?

14 PAUL: That's it. *(Pulls out hanky and wipes PROSECUTOR's spit*
 15 *off face.)*

16 PROSECUTOR: Let me get this straight. Are you telling us
 17 that Jess Goodnuff is perfect?

18 PAUL: *(Intimidated, but not lying)* Well, no! 'Course not. He's
 19 not perfect, but who is?

20 PROSECUTOR: Exactly! No further questions.

21 JUDGE: The witness may step down. *(PAUL returns to his seat.)*
 22 Mr. Goodnuff, you may call your next witness.

23 JESS: The defense would like to call Mrs. Amy Goodnuff to
 24 the stand. *(AMY steps up to the witness stand, places left hand*
 25 *on BAILIFF's Bible, and raises right hand.)*

26 BAILIFF: Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and
 27 nothing but the truth, so help you God?

28 AMY: I do.

29 JESS: Hi, sweetheart! *(Little kiss)* Did you see that I vacuumed
 30 and dusted the house for you today? . . . Have I told you
 31 how much I love you? . . . I bought you a rose. . . Oh, by
 32 the way, I found that anniversary present I forgot to give
 33 you last year. Sweets to the sweet. *(Suddenly serious)* Mrs.
 34 Goodnuff . . . Amy . . . honey, how long have you been
 35 married to me?

1 **AMY:** Ten long . . .

2 **JESS:** And wonderful!

3 **AMY:** Whatever. Ten long and wonderful years.

4 **JESS:** All right, sweetheart, would you tell the court if I have
5 been a faithful husband all those years?

6 **AMY:** OK. . . . Now is faithful the same as good? OK. Wait. Yes,
7 Jess has been a faithful husband.

8 **JESS:** Thank you. No further questions.

9 **JUDGE:** Mr. Prosecutor, do you wish to cross-examine the
10 witness?

11 **PROSECUTOR:** Yesss! Mrs. Goodnuff, obviously you agree
12 that Jess has been a faithful husband. Are you then telling
13 this court that he is basically a good guy?

14 **AMY:** Well . . . uh . . . yeah, basically.

15 **PROSECUTOR:** Are you asking this court to believe that he
16 is essentially a nice person?

17 **AMY:** Wellll . . . He is a person . . . and he can be nice. (*Wipes*
18 *PROSECUTOR's spit spray off with a hanky.*)

19 **PROSECUTOR:** So at heart, you would say he is no worse
20 than anybody else?

21 **AMY:** If you put it that way, I guess not.

22 **PROSECUTOR:** Would you go so far as to say Jess has been
23 a "perfect" husband?

24 **AMY:** Jess?! (*Gets tickled at the very thought of JESS being*
25 *described as a "perfect" husband and starts to giggle.*)

26 **PROSECUTOR:** No further questions.

27 **AMY:** (*As she leaves the witness stand, she pauses by JESS's desk,*
28 *still giggling.*) Perfect husband? I told you to plead insanity!
29 (*She returns to her seat.*)

30 **JUDGE:** You may call your next witness.

31 **JESS:** The defense calls Reverend Dave Leetzel to the stand.

32 **REVEREND:** (*Taking his place at the witness stand*) That's
33 **Leitzel!** (*He places his left hand on BAILIFF's Bible and raises*
34 *his right hand.*)

35 **BAILIFF:** Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and

1 nothing but the truth, so help you God?

2 **REVEREND:** I do.

3 **JESS:** Reverend Leitzel, would you tell the court if Mr. Jess

4 Goodnuff was a regular attender at your church?

5 **REVEREND:** Jess Goodnuff? . . . (*Thinks.*) Goodnuff, you say?

6 **JESS:** Yes. Please tell the court that Jess Goodnuff was a

7 regular and faithful member of the church, OK?

8 **PROSECUTOR:** Objection, Your Honor! He is leading the

9 witness.

10 **JUDGE:** Sustained.

11 **REVEREND:** Goodnuff, huh? Maybe if you had a picture or

12 something . . .

13 **JESS:** It's me, you idiot!

14 **PROSECUTOR:** Objection, Your Honor! Now he's abusing the

15 witness!

16 **JUDGE:** Sustained.

17 **REVEREND:** Oh, of course! Why, yes! Now I remember.

18 You're the young fellow who used to sleep in the third

19 pew from the back — every Christmas and Easter.

20 **JESS:** No further questions.

21 **REVEREND:** Came for three Sundays in a row after you had

22 that hernia operation back in 1982, right?

23 **JUDGE:** Mr. Prosecutor, do you have any questions?

24 **PROSECUTOR:** Yesss . . . No!

25 **JUDGE:** The witness may step down. (*REVEREND returns to*

26 *his seat.*) Does the defendant have any further witnesses?

27 **JESS:** Just one, Your Honor. I would like to call Mrs. Myrtle

28 Goodnuff to the stand. (*MOM takes her place at the witness*

29 *stand. She places her left hand on the BAILIFF's Bible and raises*

30 *her right hand.*)

31 **BAILIFF:** Mrs. Goodnuff, do you swear to tell the truth, the

32 whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?

33 **MOM:** I do.

34 **JESS:** Let the record show that Mrs. Goodnuff is my own saint

35 of a mother. Mrs. Goodnuff, do you recognize this letter?

1 MOM: Of course I do, honey. It's the letter I sent you in
2 January, after you gave me that beautiful birthday present.

3 JESS: Your Honor, I would like to read a portion of this letter
4 and then have it entered as defense exhibit number one.
5 (*Reads.*) "Dear Jess, Thank you so much for the lovely
6 birthday present. I am so proud of you and thankful that
7 I have such a wonderful son as you. I am constantly
8 bragging to my friends about you and your family..."
9 and it continues on a bit and then ends with the words,
10 "I love you very much. Mom."

11 JUDGE: Mr. Prosecutor, do you have any questions?

12 PROSECUTOR: Yesss! Could I see that correspondence?
13 (*Browses letter.*) I... uh... notice that you left out some
14 parts of the letter. (*Reading*) "I am constantly bragging to
15 my friends about you and your family." OK, now you read
16 that. But you left out the next sentence: "They all agree
17 that you have really turned your life around." (*To JESS*)
18 "Turned your life around," hmmm? Turned your life
19 around from what? Hmmm? (*Back to MOM*) Isn't it a fact
20 that he hasn't always been a saintly son? Isn't it a fact
21 that for most of his miserable life he was a sickening sack
22 of sordid sin who was a source of sorrow to family and
23 friends?

24 MOM: (*Wipes spit from face.*) But he's really been a good boy.

25 PROSECUTOR: Good boy, hmmm? Like the night in 1982
26 when you had to bail him out of the jail after he'd been
27 arrested for public intoxication?

28 MOM: Well, no, but...

29 PROSECUTOR: He's *always* been a good boy? Then why did
30 you spend the night of June 21, 1980, in tears, praying that
31 God would save him from the drugs and drinking?

32 MOM: How did you know about that?

33 PROSECUTOR: How do you explain the summer of 1986
34 when for six months, six days and six hours you doubted
35 his marriage could even survive?

- 1 **MOM:** Well, nobody's perfect.
- 2 **PROSECUTOR:** You don't ssay? No further questions.
- 3 **JUDGE:** The witness may step down. (*MOM leaves the stand*
4 *sobbing, but pauses by JESS's desk and gives him a pathetic*
5 *little hug before she returns to her seat.*) Do you have any
6 further witnesses, Mr. Goodnuff?
- 7 **JESS:** What for? It's hopeless.
- 8 **JUDGE:** There's no one who can come to your defense?
- 9 **JESS:** I have no defense.
- 10 **PROSECUTOR:** Yesss!
- 11 **JUDGE:** (*Angrily*) Order in the court! (*To the PROSECUTOR*)
12 I will not tolerate outbursts from you! (*Calms down.*) All
13 right, if there are no further witnesses for the
14 defense . . . Mr. Prosecutor, do you wish to call any
15 witnesses?
- 16 **PROSECUTOR:** I don't need any witnesssss!
- 17 **JUDGE:** If there are no further arguments, then I must render
18 a verdict. I remind you all that I take no pleasure in this
19 action. Let no one think that I in any way enjoy passing
20 judgment upon the defendant. But, as was stated from the
21 beginning, all the prosecutor needed to do was show
22 beyond a shadow of a doubt that the defendant has sinned
23 and fallen short of God's desire for his life. Sadly enough,
24 it was Mr. Goodnuff's own defense that provided the
25 prosecutor with all the damaging evidence needed to
26 convict him. Having listened to all the evidence and
27 concluding that it more than substantiates the charge
28 leveled against him, it is my sad duty to render my verdict:
29 I find the defendant . . .
30 (*During the JUDGE's rendering of the verdict, a conversation*
31 *has been taking place between the BAILIFF and JESS. This*
32 *following conversation is the real focus of the scene. It will have*
33 *to be timed to end at the moment the JUDGE is about to render*
34 *the verdict.*)
- 35 **BAILIFF:** Psst! . . . Psst!



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