

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Testify: A Life’s Apology”

Dr. Jay Howell

Acts 25:1-12

April 12, 2026

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But what we’ll soon find is that it’s as much his life that’s doing the talking as it is his lips.

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Though the church had taken some bold steps in the inclusion of Gentiles, not requiring them to adhere to all aspects of Jewish law, the elders in Jerusalem were still cognizant of perception especially in a place like Jerusalem, so they instruct Paul to go to the temple to take part in a Jewish purification ritual with some others, just to demonstrate that Paul wasn't antagonistic toward Jewish tradition and law, as a nod to the many Jewish Christians there in the city.

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During that span going to the temple, he is seen by Jews who recognized him from his time in Asia Minor, and they stir up the crowd to seize him, arrest him, and throw him in prison.

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It is in the midst of that series that one night, it tells us "The Lord stood near him and said, 'Keep up your courage! For just as you have testified for me in Jerusalem, so you must bear witness also in Rome'" (23:11). And just right there, a seed is planted, giving Paul his direction. Though it would be some time before it happens.

Because after that point, Paul is transferred from Jerusalem to Caesarea, the Roman seat of power in the region, appears before the Roman governor Felix, but Felix is caught in the middle of some things, so he keeps Paul in something like a loose imprisonment, maybe a house arrest for two years.

Two years. Paul is imprisoned for two years. And for what? For going to the temple for a ritual.

That is what brings us to today's passage. A new governor named Festus takes office, and he's keen to get to work in tying up some loose ends. His first exposure to Paul isn't Paul himself; it's from the chief priests and leaders who come to him to report against Paul. Reading between the lines, it seems like the Jewish leaders are trying to influence the new governor while he's getting his feet under him. Even after two years of Paul being out of the picture, publicly at least, still they wanted to get at him. So they press Festus to transfer Paul from Caesarea back to Jerusalem so they could ambush Paul on the way and kill him.

Festus seems to sniff out their agenda, so he invites the Jewish leaders to come to Caesarea instead so he could hear from them and from Paul directly. When that happens, they get right back into it.

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Paul, two years in prison, two years in prison because he had gone to the temple for a purification ritual, and when he's brought out to stand before the new governor, it's right back into things.

So Paul says, "I have in no way committed an offense against the law of the Jews, or against the temple, or against the emperor," and then later, "Now if I am in the wrong and have committed something for which I deserve to die, I am not trying to escape death; but if there is nothing to their charges against me, no one can turn me over to them. I appeal to the emperor."

There's some shrewdness in Paul's response. As a Roman citizen, if he perceived that he wouldn't get a fair shake in one place, he could appeal to the highest authority in the land, the emperor himself. Now given the direction from the Lord he had received, to bear witness in Rome, Paul didn't appeal to Caesar solely to get a fair trial but to orchestrate his transfer to Rome in faithfulness to what the Lord had guided him to do. And Festus obliges: "You have appealed to the emperor; to the emperor you will go."

But his shrewdness aside, the gist of Paul's testimony, here to this new governor, after two years of being mothballed, isn't some grand address—that'll come later. It's effectively, "What did I do? If I did something, what are the charges, and what is the evidence for them?"

So the substance of Paul's testimony, at this point in time, isn't necessarily the words of a gospel tract, a speech he had been crafting and fine-tuning during his years of imprisonment. It's the sum of his actions, his public behavior, even his willingness to abide by the authority of the laws of the land—if I did something deserving death, I'm not trying to escape it, he says.

Have you ever considered your own testimony that way? I mean this not in the legal sense, but in a spiritual sense, as in one's story of faith. Often we consider our "testimony" or anyone's "testimony" as words you say or a story you verbally tell, and very often it is precisely that.

But because we consider our "testimony" so often to be verbal, it can really intimidate us—we'll get to that in other weeks. Have we considered how the substance of our actions, our behavior, our conduct in public and private is in a sense our testimony? In other words, how does your life, how does my life communicate unmistakably that you/I believe that single piece of news that could change everything, that Jesus is alive?

Is it just by being, I don't know, generally nice to people? A common kindness is a good place to start, but lots of people are commonly kind. That's what makes it common. Is there an uncommon kindness to our conduct?

There's something about Paul's posture here before the governor. He knows that it's his life on trial, his life and work that is being held to account. There's an old-timey use of a word, an "apology," that may apply here. "Apology" isn't quite old-timey, but the way we use it now is more about how we say we're sorry, but in an old-timey usage, "apology" means more of a defense or an account. This is an "apology" for his life.

And his posture while doing so is not necessarily nice, but it's definitely not combative. He's calm, but he's convicted. He's respectful, but he's resolute. Juxtapose that to the frenzied, unhinged, baseless accusations being hurled by the Jewish leaders surrounding him.

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