

# SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## “Testify: Shepherds”

**Dr. Jay Howell**

**Acts 26:12-23**

May 10, 2026

This is the second-to-last week of our “Testify” series, going through a section of Paul’s trials and defenses toward the end of the Book of Acts. And as we’ve gone through, we’ve asked, what impact might Paul’s words and actions (and the words and actions of those in his orbit) have upon our own sense of testimony, the stories of faith we tell in what we say and what we do.

We’ll wrap up this series next week, so a word on what will come next. In two weeks, we’ll begin a special series that’ll run the course of the summer going through the Apostles’ Creed, phrase by phrase, and we’ll be led by Pastors Mark, Ben, and Janna along the way. As I’ve shared on a few different occasions and in a few different avenues, I will be starting a sabbatical in just under two weeks and will be away from you late May until the end of July.

Not a lot of professions that include the rhythm of extended time away from the day-to-day, week-to-week rhythm every seven years, so I am grateful for this gift. The intention of a sabbatical is not just for the pastor’s benefit but for the church’s, so by God’s grace and the Spirit’s leading, I hope that you also will be grateful—and not in the “Whew, thank God we don’t have to listen to him for two months” way.

I’ve never done a sabbatical before, so I’m curious as to what the Lord may have in store for me, but in general the plan is of course rest, time with my family, time in study and spiritual renewal, but more specifically study in models of renewal through the great Protestant Reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin as well as figures and writings from the Catholic Counter-Reformation. If you want to nerd out on church history stuff once I’m back, let’s get together.

Today, though, as we continue hearing about Paul’s testimony, we hear how he recounts his own transformation, his own conversion, and one has to wonder, is this something we might replicate? Let’s go to God’s Word together.

[Read passage, Acts 26:12-23.] The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Loving God, we thank you for this testimony of your faithfulness to move us, to draw us out, and never to let us go. We pray that the transformation we hear testified to here might be felt in each of us, whether all at once or over time. Sanctify us through faith in you, we pray, as are shaped by your Word. And for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Well where did that come from? That had to have been going through at least some of the folks in attendance there that day. As a quick recap, the Apostle Paul had been imprisoned upon his return to Jerusalem, and long story short, now appeared before a gathering of Roman and Jewish luminaries in the city of Caesarea, including the Roman governor Festus and the ceremonial Jewish king Agrippa. This gathering, though not an official trial, had all the trappings and pomp and circumstance of something more or less official. So a fair question

for anyone in attendance, but especially those who may have known a bit of Paul's story, to have asked, "Well, where did that come from?"

Paul has shared this astounding testimony of how he was on his way to Damascus for the expressed purpose of persecuting Christians. The way he didn't put it was that he was a star on the rise within the ranks of the Pharisees. Point is, he had every incentive to keep doing what he had been doing. And then, a full 180. He retells here, as he has on a couple of instances, how on the way to Damascus, he was blinded by a light from heaven and heard a voice, Jesus' voice, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It hurts you to kick against the goads." Another way of saying, you're doing something futile.

But Paul adds a few notes he hadn't before, more of what Jesus revealed to him directly. In v. 17, Jesus says, "I will rescue you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me." In other words, it is Paul being directly commissioned by Christ himself to bring the gospel to the Gentiles, to all nations, that they might know the light and power of God and the forgiveness of sins. Then Paul goes on to describe how he had followed that dramatic commissioning, proclaiming a message consistent with the prophets and Moses that the Christ must suffer, that he has risen again, and in the gospel is proclaiming, in v. 23, "light both to our people and to the Gentiles."

Where did that come from? And in fact, that's much the reaction he gets, which we'll get to next week. But while his onlookers considered him with skepticism, from the standpoint of other believers, this is the kind of transformation, the kind of impact that, simply speaking, we'd hope would happen more often, right?

I mean, isn't that the hope? Not that each of us would necessarily have the same Damascus Road experience, but that certainly that, if we actually believe what we say we believe, there would be this kind of calling and conviction growing in the heart of all who would follow Jesus. I mean, what would it say about the church if the goal was, "Eh, our hope is that you'd nominally say Jesus was okay and show up on Christmas and Easter and maybe Mothers' Day too, but otherwise don't worry about it"? Doesn't exactly match up with the whole, "This is the truth of reality" claim, with eternal significance, does it? No, obviously, this kind of transformation is something we would hope for, so we might be asking in a different way, "Where did that come from? And how might we replicate it?" Is there a process we might follow? Is there a recipe?

I mean we know that we cannot nor should we presume to step into the place of Jesus himself and seek to blind people on a road of transformation, but were there other influences in Paul's life that we might seek to emulate? Or should we even bother? I mean if the lesson here from this passage is that we need to wait for a blinding light from the Lord for something to happen, why bother with seeking to share or instill faith in another in the first place?

There's a field of neuroscience called behavioral genetics. And we're all aware of DNA and things like that, and I'd guess most are on board with the notion that certain things about us are simply engrained at a genetic level like height and hair color. I mean, yes, nutrition and lifestyle can influence some things, but if in your DNA you're going to be 5'8", ain't no amount of milk and vegetables going to turn you into 6'8". We're all okay with this. Where behavioral genetics comes in is in saying that even more subjective things are engrained at a genetic level within us, getting into things like personality and character, qualities like extroversion, introversion,

aggression and anger, depression and sadness, even things like a sense of humor or a sense of justice and, perhaps, more to the point of this sermon, a sense of faith, all baked into one's DNA.

Now I don't completely buy this, so I want to be charitable, so if a behavioral geneticist were standing here explaining the claims of it, they'd say, no it's not like we're all robots programmed to behave a certain way. Your DNA isn't dictating that you be sad or talkative or angry or shy in this or that situation. A million different influences in that. But what they would say, and one person named Sam Harris (who's kind of a public scholar and writer) offered it this way, is that it's about predispositions, about tendencies, that outside of extreme instances of abuse or neglect, there is no greater factor influencing someone's personality and behavior than genetics. Even parenting, he would claim, cannot outweigh or reverse what we are genetically predisposed toward.

Even as it pertains to faith, Harris would say—and he's a part of what are known as the “New Atheists” so yeah he comes to this from a certain perspective—there are genetic predispositions toward spiritual matters, that one based simply on their DNA could be more inclined or less inclined toward abstract aspects of the divine or the spiritual. Therefore, Paul, in giving his testimony before Festus and Agrippa, could have said, “Yes, I had this experience on the road to Damascus, but really I had been tilting toward this my whole life.”

So this is shaping up to be a great sermon on Mothers' Day, right? Mothers out there, and not just mothers, but parents in general, and even more broadly all those who seek to cultivate and guide faith in another person, young or old, really it's all just in their DNA, so don't bother. All our efforts and strategies in making disciples, all the parenting hacks and trends out there on social media, every approach we bring to bear in guiding the kind of transformation we hear Paul tell us about, really it's just genetic makeup, so don't bother.

I said already I don't completely buy this line of thought, but it's out there, and maybe there is even some truth in it, and maybe there's something constructive and biblical embedded in it. Because I know something I do see, something I see all around, and something I feel personally, is the weight and perceived responsibility for who other people become. This hits on a number of levels. For our leaders and volunteers in Christian Formation, teaching our children, guiding our youth, leading our Bible Studies, feeling responsible for the faith of those they teach. As a pastor and for our elders, feeling responsible for the healthy faith across the board within our congregation and witness within our community. And especially among parents, feeling responsible not just for the faith of our children but for all the other markers of character and personality and being a contributing member of society. And on one hand, not the worst thing in the world: to feel and take seriously the responsibility of guiding another in faith and life. But too often, especially among parents, I've seen it turn more into obsession and into guilt. Am I doing enough? What did I do wrong? My child (of any age) did this or didn't do that. That is my failure and mine alone.

If Paul's parents—and we don't really hear much about them in Scripture—but if Paul's parents were in attendance that day he testified before Festus and Agrippa and heard how he had made this about face, going full tilt, into this wayward Christian sect, would they have been thinking, “What did we do wrong?”

We can become so consumed by the perceived responsibility for the faith and actions and choices that other people make in their lives, that we become wracked with guilt and regret. And I'm not sure that's consistent with the gospel either.

There's a neuropsychologist named Russell Barkley with specialties in child and adolescent psychology—and like the other guy I cited, this is not an endorsement of everything he's ever said—but in one presentation about parental influence, just from a psychological and psychiatric perspective, he outlined the difference between

engineers and shepherds, commenting on what he saw as parental pressure to manufacture outcomes within a child's life. He shares the following:

“Your child is born with more than 400 psychological traits that will emerge as they mature, and they have nothing to do with you. So the idea that you are going to engineer personalities and IQs and academic achievement skills and all these other things just isn't true. Your child is not a blank slate on which you get to write.

“[And then later,] The engineering view makes you responsible for everything—everything that goes right and everything that goes wrong. This is why parents come to us with such guilt. More guilt than we've ever seen in prior generations....

“So I would rather you would stop thinking of yourself as an engineer, and step back and say, ‘I am a shepherd to a unique individual.’ Shepherds are powerful people. They pick the pastures in which the sheep will graze and develop and grow. They determine whether they're appropriately nourished. They determine whether they're protected from harm. The environment is important but it doesn't design the sheep. No shepherd is going to turn a sheep into a dog. Ain't gonna happen. And yet that is what we see parents trying to do, all the time.”

And I wonder if we're guilty of thinking ourselves engineers in matters of faith, in the gospel of Christ—as parents, or more broadly as a church—seeking to design and manufacture the kind of transformation and instill the kind of faith and conviction we see in someone like the Apostle Paul.

I wonder what would happen if we saw ourselves more as shepherds, shepherds charged with the proper protection and nourishment of the sheep in our care, of preparing the right pastures, of being faithful in what we know we are called to do, but releasing the outcome to God. We might be surprised by what testimonies emerged.

Just last week, we celebrated our annual Youth Sunday. And as always, I was greatly encouraged by the words and the teaching of our seniors. One of the seniors, Liam Doiron, you'll remember was plumbing some theological depths in his sermon, as the others were doing too. Now, Liam, if you know him, is not the sort of person who would raise his hand and say, “Hey, you know what I'd really like to do? Stand up and talk about my personal faith in front of a crowd of people.” Not that sort. But he did. He did so with thoughtfulness and depth. Go back and watch all our seniors who spoke last week.

After the service, I spoke with Liam's parents, Robyn and Nick. And of course, bursting with parental pride for their son, gratitude for the faith they saw him express, especially while doing something they knew he wasn't comfortable doing. But then alongside that pride and gratitude was a sense of surprise.

As Nick put it afterward, to the effect of, “We did our best, and I mean, tried to do what we were supposed to, but we didn't know that was there. Where did that come from?” Where, indeed?

Mothers, fathers, youth leaders, children's teachers, Bible Study leaders. What are you? Shepherds all of you. May we do what we are charged to do, called to do, but may we then watch with hope and gratitude for the mighty work the gospel of Christ might do.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.