

# SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## “Testify: Quickly or Not”

Dr. Jay Howell | Acts 26:24-31

May 17, 2026

Today wraps up this “Testify” series, looking at Paul’s hearing before the Roman governor Festus and Agrippa, the ceremonial king of the Jews, here toward the end of the Book of Acts. And as we’ve seen, the way Paul offers himself up, the way he offers his story, even the way he positions his story—not to mention how others testify about him too—all point to how his testimony is meant to declare something about the grace and power of Christ, the power to forgive, the power to transform, the power to save.

Next week, we’ll start a summer series going through the Apostles Creed phrase by phrase, and Pastors Ben, Jenna, and Mark will lead us through. As I’ve shared from time to time and in particular last week, I will be going on sabbatical at the end of this week until early August. Rather than rehash the points I shared about sabbatical last week, I’ll only reiterate my gratitude to the church, to the Session for this gift of time away in rest, renewal, study, and time with my family, and I look forward to being back with you at the beginning of August.

Today, Paul’s listeners are given a chance to respond. Paul’s taken his shot, so it would appear. So let’s see where all this testimony has gotten him.

*While he was making this defense, Festus exclaimed, “You are out of your mind, Paul! Too much learning is driving you insane!” But Paul said, “I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking the sober truth. Indeed, the king knows about these things, and to him I speak freely, for I am certain that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this was not done in a corner. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe.” Agrippa said to Paul, “Are you so quickly persuading me to become a Christian?” Paul replied, “Whether quickly or not, I pray to God that not only you but also all who are listening to me today might become such as I am—except for these chains.”*

*Then the king got up and with him the governor and Bernice and those who had been seated with them, and as they were leaving they said to one another, “This man is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment.”*

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Glorious God, we thank you for your timing, for it is beyond all of us. We thank you for the seeds planted by your Word, some of which we recognize quickly, others not for a long time if at all. Speak to us anew this morning, we pray, and for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Not quite the reaction Paul was hoping for. Or at least it wouldn’t have been the reaction I would’ve been hoping for.

“You are out of your mind, Paul! Too much learning is driving you insane!” That was the governor who said that.

All that testimony, and not just what he said, all the preparation that went into it, all the thought and deliberate action Paul had taken, appealing to Caesar so that the governor would be forced to send him to Rome, but then as a result being able to appear before this gathering not just of the governor and King Agrippa, but of a who’s who of Romanized society there in the coastal city of Caesarea. And remember Paul had two years to think this over. He was imprisoned for that long, considering what steps he might take and, we might imagine, what words he might say should such a gathering in fact take place.

Paul perhaps realized that there was a window of opportunity here. People would gather, certain people of influence in particular, military influence, social influence, financial influence, religious influence. If maybe Paul, through some special appeal, some carefully crafted remarks with meticulously paced delivery, could open a window or two in the hearts of those gathered, I mean consider the impact.

At the very least after he got done, maybe he could have hoped to get some kind of slow clap. You know, heartfelt speech. A stunned audience. No one really knows what to think or how to react, but then one person gets it started, then another joins in, then the whole room is picking up speed, maybe one person lets out a cry of applause, then another, and all of a sudden the whole room is rising to its feet in applause and affirmation. I mean, at least a slow clap.

Instead he got, “Have you lost your mind?”

Has that ever happened to you? Not someone saying “Have you lost your mind?” necessarily, but a reaction that completely deflated what you had otherwise poured a lot into.

I remember years ago seeing a stage-version of *A Christmas Carol*, the Ebenezer Scrooge, Charles Dickens story. It was just at a local town and gown sort of theater, and the lead who was playing Scrooge really wanted to get into character apparently. At a point near the end when Scrooge is having this big epiphany about the worth of his life and the sad trajectory he was on if he didn’t change his ways, the actor went heavy into overacting, crying out loudly, stamping and stomping around the stage in turmoil, rolling around on the ground even.

Then finally when the performance reaches its peak, there was a pregnant pause and a few seconds of silence in the theater. Clearly we as the audience were supposed to take in the emotional weight of the moment.

But in the silence, in reaction to the crying and the stamping and the stomping and the rolling around on the ground, from the audience there was a single, muffled \*snort.\*

I kinda felt for the guy. Not too much though; he was a horrible actor. But when you put yourself out there like that and the reaction you get back completely dismisses or deflates everything you had hoped to do, it can be hard to bounce back from it.

So imagine how you would’ve felt if in Paul’s shoes, offering this testimony, seizing this window of opportunity, planning and preparing for it for years, only to be met with “Have you lost your mind?”

Then, adding insult to injury, when Paul tries to shift the attention back to Agrippa, flattering him a bit and noting his familiarity with the Hebrew scriptures, the king scoffs, “Are you so quickly persuading me to become a Christian?”

Here’s something to know about Agrippa. He’s from the line of Herod the Great, you know the king back when Jesus was born (who in his reign actually had some degree of autonomy and authority under Rome), but the role of the Jewish king had since become largely ceremonial, just something the Romans would allow if it pleased them. But that meant whoever was this Jewish king was king at the mercy of the Romans. So maybe it shouldn’t come as a surprise that Agrippa, when the time came a few years after this during an uprising among the Jews against Rome, this “King of the Jews” sided with...the Romans. Can you believe that? He even sent soldiers, Jewish soldiers, to fight for the Romans...against his own people. That’s the sort of person he was, just a political opportunist.

So maybe it shouldn’t have been surprising to Paul or to us that Agrippa wasn’t going to be dislodged from his seat of comfort by some heartfelt testimony of a prisoner. Tough nut to crack, you could say.

But then Paul replies to Agrippa, “Whether quickly or not, I pray to God that not only you but also all who are listening to me today might become such as I am—except for these chains.”

“Whether quickly or not.”

Just in those words, Paul shows us what his intention was in this whole thing. He knew he was going to Rome. He knew that's what he was supposed to do. (And truly, if he hadn't appealed to the emperor, he would've been set free after all this.) But as he was here, as this opportunity arose, he saw an opening to share the gospel with an audience he otherwise would likely never have been able to speak to. And even knowing that there in that moment, there likely wasn't going to be some mass revival of all these movers and shakers coming to Christ, that wasn't his goal. His goal was merely to be faithful in sharing the gospel in whatever opportunity afforded to him, and leaving the results—and their timing—to the Lord.

Is there someone in your life whose “journey of faith” has been frustratingly winding? Or maybe you already know that your own “journey of faith” has been frustratingly winding to someone else? Maybe this is a parent, a sibling, a spouse, a child, a friend. And maybe there have been instances in which you had hoped that as a result of something you said or in response to some grand gesture, this person would have a realization, that they need Christ in their life, open their eyes and declare to you, “I've been so wrong, so blind, and now I see the light.” Maybe some has witnessed that very thing, but then others—and maybe for most—we do not see that kind of switch in real time, and certainly not in the timing we would expect or want or plan for.

Today, we ordain and install new elders and deacons. It's a big moment in the life of the church each year, the excitement of these women and men who have discerned the Lord's call and the congregation's affirmation to serve in these positions of leadership. And inevitably, each of them may have wondered, well, what will the next three years, their term of service, hold? And maybe along with that wondering, an expectation that certain goals would be met over that timespan. Or maybe we have goals, maybe we have expectations for goals that would be met over the next three years. But the work of ministry doesn't so neatly fall into language of goals and expectations.

And we can fall into this personally too, thinking, well by this time next year, I should be at *this* level of faith and devotion, or maybe we're realizing that a year ago, we were thinking that by this time now, we should've been at *that* level of faith and devotion, but we realize we're not, and we're disappointed. Even in the preparation for this sabbatical, a time set part for rest and renewal, I've been catching myself thinking as I've made plans for study here and travel there, “Well by such and such date, I should be feeling this level of renewal, and by that date I should have come to this point of spiritual catharsis, and then by this point, I will have enjoyed this amount of reconnection with family, and then by the end I will have attained a perfectly executed sabbatical. Check, check, check.”

Kind of silly when you think about it. Good to set goals, a lot of times. Good to voice them. Good to plan, good to prepare. And in service to God, as individuals and together as a church, we should be diligent, we should be disciplined, we should be deliberate, prepared, strategic even. But leave the results up to God.

This is what faithful testimony is, the sharing of one's story in our actions and our words in witness to the good news of Jesus. Its success or failure isn't so much ours to measure.

The impact of Paul's testimony might have been considered a failure by any measure there that day. Agrippa didn't come to any conversion. Doesn't appear that he did at any point in his life. As I mentioned before, he sided with the Romans against his own people about ten years later, and at the end of his life, he retired to an estate in Italy bestowed upon him by the emperor himself for loyalty to Rome. No indication that Paul's words made a dent.

But do we think that Paul considered his testimony there that day a failure?

No. He was there only to be a faithful witness, offering a faithful testimony, in whatever circumstance the Lord placed him. You can do the same, and leave the results to the Lord.

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