

The Author of Acts
Acts 25:23–26:18
July 10, 2022

One of my favorite books for children is *The Wingfeather Saga* by Andrew Peterson. Though there ended up being four books in the series, I recently heard Andrew say the first book alone took him five years to write. The guys interviewing asked, “Did you know where you were going before you started?” He replied along these lines, “I didn’t know every twist and turn, necessarily, but I knew the story before I wrote it.” In other words, he’d worked out the broad-brush details of the overarching story before he sat down to write the first book.

When that’s the case, good authors give attentive readers details that won’t matter for another 200 pages. I recently experienced this with *The Two Towers*. Back in book one, each member of the Fellowship had been given a parting gift by the elves: a belt, a sheath, a bow, or a rope, for examples. In book two—hundreds of pages later—Sam and Frodo are on the side of a cliff, struggling to figure out how they’ll live scampering down it. I’d of course forgotten about the gifts, too wondering how they’ll get down, but then Sam remembers the gift of rope in his bag.

We sometimes think—maybe—a detail is in there by chance. But, in a well-written book, there’s purpose to those details because someone is writing it. One benefit of hanging with Luke for about five years now is seeing again and again his literary artistry. He’ll introduce a character briefly—like Barnabas in Acts 4—that ends up playing a central role in chapters nine to fifteen. In both his gospel and in Acts, Luke’s organized the material carefully, including particular details on purpose. Much more importantly, if we affirm the inspiration of Scripture, Luke is far from the ultimate author. Acts 25–26 stand written by the Spirit of God. Further, if we affirm the providence of a sovereign God, every event recorded in Acts 25–26 was directed by Him.

Maybe we say, “Does any of that matter for my life in 2022?” One difference between feeling as if the mundane details of our lives are meaningless or seeing purpose in the day to day is whether or not we believe there’s an author. The difficulty of believing the latter to be true is often heightened when circumstances are challenging, which is where we find Paul.

1. A Prisoner Amid Pageantry (25:23–26:3)

In chapter 24, with false charges piled up, Paul gave his defense before Felix the Governor. In *that* defense he pointed out the lack of evidence and the complete absence of eyewitness testimony. In a just court, Paul’s case would’ve been thrown out. Yet Felix—hoping for a bribe—left Paul in prison for over two years. Felix was then succeeded by a man named Festus. In last week’s text, Festus too hears Paul’s case. Once again, according to Luke, the Jews brought **many and serious charges which they could not prove** (25:7).

Though Festus agreed with Luke’s conclusion (25:19), it’s just never been that simple for Paul. **Wishing to do the Jews a favor**, Festus asks him if he wants to go back to Jerusalem (25:9). Paul’s been there. He’s not eager to return. But, more importantly, he has somewhere *else* to be, someone else to speak to. So, he appeals to Caesar (25:11). A few days go by. King Agrippa and his sister Bernice roll into town. Festus tells Agrippa about Paul. The last verse of last week’s text was this, v. 22: **Then Agrippa said to Festus, “I also would like to hear the man myself.”**

One of the first sermons I ever preached in Sparta included a quote by John Piper. Because he was relatively new to me, and I assumed to those listening, I introduced him in terms like these: “John Piper, a pastor at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, the author of *Desiring God*, said this sentence.” Today, in *this* room, if I gave excerpts of Piper’s resumé to you all as if you’d never heard of him, some of you would give me the side eye. Here in Acts 26, Luke’s doesn’t give us the

bio of the king because the audience would've known Agrippa and Bernice.¹ They were red carpet politicians of the day. They might've been on a magazine cover in the grocery checkout line. Agrippa II was the great grandson of Herod the Great, the Herod that attempted to murder the infant Jesus. Herod the Great's son—Antipas—beheaded John the Baptist. His grandson—Agrippa's father—martyred James the son of Zebedee.² These are not obscure people. Agrippa likely would've still been alive when Luke wrote Acts.³ Bernice was his famous sister.⁴ Luke didn't need to give their bio. The ones that wanted to hear Paul's case were well-known.

Verse 23: **So, on the next day when Agrippa came together with Bernice amid great pomp, and entered the auditorium accompanied by the commanders and the prominent men of the city.** Luke uses the word “pomp” to describe this scene of pageantry. One commentator writes of Agrippa and Bernice, “They would have on their purple robes of royalty and the gold circlet of the crown on their brows.”⁵ In this room, governors, royalty, military commanders, and **the prominent men of the city** have gathered. The room they've gathered in is not an official place of justice, but an audience hall, the former palace of Herod.⁶ You ought to google ancient Caesarea. This is more Buckingham Palace than 201 Poplar. Trumpets might've sounded. Men and women might've bowed, taken a few steps and bowed again, as if they were approaching George III.

Luke's vivid description of the room sets us up for contrast. Amid this great pomp, into the room of prominent men, note the end of verse 23: **at the command of Festus, Paul was brought in.** Paul's twice Agrippa and Bernice's age.⁷ He's endured more than twice as much. They've lived in luxury. He's traveled thousands of miles on foot, been beaten repeatedly, and been shackled for years. Festus introduces the prisoner. Verse 24: **Festus said, “King Agrippa, and all you gentlemen here present with us, you see this man about whom all the people of the Jews appealed to me, both at Jerusalem and here, loudly declaring that he ought not to live any longer.”** Maybe he points,⁸ “You see this man? The Jews want him dead.”

What does Festus think about him? Verse 25: **But I found that he had committed nothing worthy of death; and since he himself appealed to the Emperor, I decided to send him.** Festus will play his part in Paul getting to Rome. But, to be clear, he's a pagan pawn. Back in Acts 23 Jesus showed up and told Paul: **Take courage; for as you have solemnly witnessed to My cause at Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also** (23:11). What are we seeing here? The author of history continues to decree, “Let there be *this*.” Then He says it again. In these moments, He's using Festus to accomplish His purposes.

What else are we seeing here? Festus joins the others that have declared Paul innocent. In Luke's first volume, he recorded a similar scene with rulers and authorities, including one from Agrippa's family tree. Luke 23:13: **Pilate summoned the chief priests and the rulers and the people, and said to them, “You brought this man to me as one who incites the people to rebellion, and behold, having examined Him before you, I have found no guilt in this man regarding the charges you make against Him. No, nor has Herod, for he sent Him back to us; and behold, nothing deserving death has been done by Him.”** You think Luke forgot what

¹ Craig Keener, *Acts*, NCBC, 577.

² Stott, 370.

³ Keener, 577.

⁴ Eckhard Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 995.

⁵ Quoted in John Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 369.

⁶ Scott Kellum, *Acts*, EGGNT, 284; Schnabel, 999.

⁷ Schnabel, 995, says Agrippa and Bernice are in their early thirties and Paul is sixty.

⁸ Schnabel, 1000.

he wrote in Luke 23—with Herod and Pilate—when he was writing Acts 25 with Agrippa and Festus? The parallels are not on accident.

See Paul’s suffering. Be reminded of His Lord’s suffering. And be reminded of Your Lord’s assurances. Are we ok with this one? **If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you** (Jn. 15:20). Jesus said Paul would make it to Rome. He would. Jesus said Paul would suffer. He did.⁹

The scene in Acts continues. Verse 26: **Yet I have nothing definite about him to write to my lord. Therefore I have brought him before you all and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that after the investigation has taken place, I may have something to write. For it seems absurd to me in sending a prisoner, not to indicate also the charges against him.** Before sending Paul, it was mandatory—legal even—that Festus write some version of a cover letter explaining his rationale for the transfer.¹⁰ As we noted last week in verse 20, he was **at a loss how to investigate such matters.** It seems that Festus thinks Agrippa hearing Paul might help him put together this letter for Rome.

Agrippa begins in verse 1: **Agrippa said to Paul, “You are permitted to speak for yourself.” Then Paul stretched out his hand and proceeded to make his defense; “In regard to all the things of which I am accused by the Jews, I consider myself fortunate, King Agrippa, that I am to make my defense before you today; especially because you are an expert in all customs and questions among the Jews; therefore I beg you to listen to me patiently.”**

That’s the scene. King Agrippa, Bernice, Governor Festus, prominent men of the city, and others have gathered in this hall. There’s pomp and pageantry. Festus walked Paul in, introduced him, and gave the reason for the gathering. Then, King Agrippa gave this prisoner permission to speak.

2. This Prisoner and Promise (26:4–8)

After the introductory comments, Paul begins his defense. Verse 4: **So then, all Jews know my manner of life from my youth up, which from the beginning was spent among my own nation and at Jerusalem.** He reminds them that thirty years prior, when he was close to Agrippa and Bernice’s age, Paul had been educated in Jerusalem.¹¹ Paul’s spoken like this before. In chapter 22 before the Jewish mob, and in chapter 24 before Claudius the commander, Paul asserted that his track record spoke for itself. Similarly, before Agrippa, he’s calling his opponents as witnesses to his character, should they have the guts.¹² Verse 5: **Since they have known about me for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that I lived as a Pharisee according to the strictest sect of our religion.**

Again, as he’d done previously, Paul is laying the groundwork to clarify why he was in chains. And it wasn’t because he was anti-Jew. He grew up faithfully practicing Jewish customs. Whether they’d admit it or not, Jerusalem knew that. Further, Paul—or Saul—wasn’t on the fringes of that Jewish community. He’d been educated by its best scholars¹³ and belonged to its strictest sect. Though he’d been charged with dismissing Moses and defiling the Holy Place, none of it was true. He’d clarified that repeatedly. While it was merely June for us, a couple *years* before our text

⁹ There’s bad news in Acts. Following Christ *will* bring suffering. But there’s good news too. The assurance of suffering is true for *everyone* that truly follows Christ. Maybe you ask: how’s that good news? That means we don’t suffer alone.

¹⁰ Keener, 580; Schnabel, 1001.

¹¹ Schnabel, 1003.

¹² Kellum, 287.

¹³ Gamaliel. See 22:3.

today Paul told Felix in 24:14: **But this I admit to you, that according the Way which they call a sect I do serve the God of our fathers, believing everything that is in accordance with the Law and that is written in the prophets, having a hope in God, which these men cherish themselves, that there shall certainly be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked.**

He wasn't anti-Moses; he still believed in the God of his Fathers. The Law and the prophets speak of a hope that he *still* held on to. He'd said that to Felix in Acts 24. Had two more years of injustice changed his tune? Verse 6: **And now I am standing trial for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers; the promise to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly serve God night and day. And for this hope, O King, I am being accused by Jews.**

Paul's living in the difficulty of his now by both looking backward and forward. Looking backward, he still believed *everything* written in the Law and the prophets. In Acts 26, he's standing on—continuing to hope in—the promise **made by God to our fathers.**

What those that accused Paul couldn't seem to grasp is that *this same God*—the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—had made Himself known by putting on flesh and dwelling among us (Jn. 1:18). What Paul believed wasn't some offshoot of Israel's journey. No, instead, it was its fulfillment.¹⁴ He hoped in what the twelve tribes of Judaism still hoped to attain.

The revelation of God in Paul's past, and the acts of God in Israel's past, also determined how Paul looked toward the future. He'd shouted out before the council in Acts 23:6: **I am on trial for the hope and resurrection of the dead.** Before Claudius the commander in Acts 24:21, he declared: **For the resurrection of the dead I am on trial before you today.** Years later, in Acts 26 before the King, he asks, verse 8: **Why is it considered incredible among you people if God does raise the dead?**

Paul makes plain, repeatedly, that the God of the Old Testament—the God that cast the stars into the heavens, that breathed life into Adam's lungs, the One that could raise dry bones—*that* God can raise the dead. In essence, Paul says, “If you believed the Old Testament, you'd believe this too.” And not only did Paul believe it, he hoped in it. As these trials come and go, as he's wronged again and again, he continues hoping in it. He knew the author of his past and his future.

Nothing else would do. Have you considered recently Peter's words to elect exiles in 1 Peter 1:13: **fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ?** And if you've considered that verse recently, have you considered why Peter had to include the word “completely?” Why not just, “Fix your hope on the grace to be brought to you?” Maybe it's because Peter knew experientially—and the One that inspired Peter knew infallibly—that we are prone to transfer *aspects* of our hope.

Maybe we think we're writing the story. So, if I do this particular thing, the right effect will follow. My actions today determine the future. Or, conversely, because I *didn't* do that, we live with the regret that we've caused our present circumstances. Taken too far, we begin to think we're close to sovereign; maybe *we're* writing the story. When *that's* the assumption, and things don't go as we planned, of course we struggle to see purpose. Theologically, what have we done? We've transferred an aspect of hope to self. And we wonder why we're so often plagued with disappointment?

Or, we've pretended that if we *do* this—an accomplishment or a trip—or we *get* that—a possession or recognition—we'll finally be happy. Or when our kids get out of diapers, or out of the house, life will finally be manageable, or good. What have we done? Again, we've transferred an aspect of hope. We're asking more of this or that thing than is promised from it. It can't, and it won't, deliver. False gods make false promises.

What did Paul write the Romans? **Hope that is seen is not hope; for who hopes for what he already sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly**

¹⁴ Brandon Crowe, *The Hope of Israel*, 75.

for it (Rom. 8:24–25). Biblical hope is more like this: though we have not seen Him, we love Him (1 Peter 1:8). Have we fixed our hope *completely*—not partially—on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ?

Paul didn't hope in what he presently saw. The world had let him down time and again, betraying him with vicious regularity. He was on trial **for the hope of the promise made by God to our Fathers**. Someone had written promises. Paul hoped in the Author of those promises.

3. His Pursuit in the Past (26:9–15)

After Paul clarifies the theological nature of his imprisonment, he returns to his past. Because we've covered his testimony a couple times, I'll try and highlight the new information he records. Verse 9: **So then, I thought to myself that I had to do many things hostile to the name of Jesus of Nazareth.** Note “many” things. Verse 10: **And this is just what I did in Jerusalem; not only did I lock up many of the saints in prisons, having received authority from the chief priests, but also when they were being put to death I cast my vote against them. And as I punished them often in all the synagogues, I tried to force them to blaspheme; and being furiously enraged at them, I kept pursuing them even to foreign cities.**

Paul's language is vivid. Luke told us in chapter 8 that he “ravaged” the church, hunting the people of God down in their homes (8:3). Here, Paul describes it himself. He purposed to do *many* hostile things. Verse 10: **And this is just what I did.** He played a part in Christians being martyred. He punished them *often*. He tortured them, hoping they would deny Christ.¹⁵ And because his anger bordered on insane rage¹⁶ he wasn't content with ridding Jerusalem of their influence, he chased them down in other cities. This is the pursuit of Saul.

Yet, the pursuit of Saul means at least two things. On the way to chase down those belonging to “The Way,” he himself was chased down. Verse 12: **While so engaged as I was journeying to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests, at midday, O King, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining all around me and those who were journeying with me.** At the moment when the sun was brightest—at midday—heaven had no trouble outshining high noon. And heaven overpowered Saul, knocking him and his entourage to the ground. Verse 14: **And when we had fallen to the ground.**¹⁷

On this road, Saul not only sees, he hears. Verse 14: **And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew dialect, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”** Luke tells us about this conversation first in Acts 9. Then, Paul recounts it in Acts 22 in Jerusalem. Here he repeats it nearly verbatim before Agrippa. This is not a conversation Saul got over, or moved past. It's been 25 years, but if he's given a chance to explain himself, he's making a beeline to the Damascus road.

He does tell us something in Acts 26 we didn't know earlier about this conversation. Jesus said to Saul, **“It is hard for you to kick against the goads.”** This is a bit graphic, but a goad is a sharp pointed stick used to drive oxen or horses. To “kick against the goads” is when one of those animals pushes back *against* the goad of its master, wounding themselves in the process. The point is that it's not only harder for the one kicking, in the end it's futile.¹⁸ What Jesus pursues, He will find. Verse 15: **And I said, “Who are You, Lord?” And the Lord said, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.”**

¹⁵ Schnabel, 1007.

¹⁶ Keener, “insane with rage,” 585.

¹⁷ Thomas Walker beautifully captures Saul's new posture: “Prostrate at the feet of his Conqueror.”

¹⁸ Schnabel, 1008; Kellum, 289.

Paul had been found. The God of his fathers made Himself known on this road. Paul saw the creator and sustainer of the world, the author of history, and, then, he heard Him speak of Paul's purpose in the future. Which is—thirty years later in Acts 26—being fulfilled in Paul's present.

4. His Purpose in the Present (26:16–18)

On the road, Jesus continues speaking. Verse 16: **But get up and stand on your feet; for this purpose I have appeared to you, to appoint you a minister and a witness not only to the things which you have seen, but also to the things in which I will appear to you.**

In essence, Jesus tells Paul that He appeared for a purpose: to commission him. Paul would witness in the future to the things he had seen. What's Paul doing right now before Agrippa? Fulfilling what Jesus said, leading Agrippa by the hand to the Damascus road, telling him what he'd seen. Paul had done the same thing in Jerusalem. What do you think he did in Ephesus, Thessalonica, Iconium, Berea, and elsewhere?

Jesus also tells Paul that he would witness to the **things in which I will appear to you**, meaning He would *continue* to reveal Himself to Paul. We know in Acts 18—in Corinth—Jesus showed up and said, **Do not be afraid any longer, but go on speaking and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city** (Acts 18:9–10). Did those words of Jesus come true? Then, Jesus appeared to Paul in Acts 23, saying, **Take courage; for as you have solemnly witnessed for My cause at Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also** (23:11). Would those words of Jesus come true? The Mamertine cell in Rome says yes. Paul would witness to what Jesus told him. I also wondered this week, “Does this commissioning include Paul's letters?” I think our doctrine of the inspiration of the book or Romans would answer, “Yes.” God spoke. Paul wrote.

Jesus appears for a purpose: to commission Paul. But He also assures Him that he would not go alone. Verse 17: **rescuing you from the Jewish people and from the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you.** This is not unlike the Great Commission. The twelve were to go, yes, but not without promise: **I am with you always, even to the end of the age** (Matt. 28:20). Jesus sent Paul into difficulty, repeatedly, but He never left him. With His sovereign hand, he rescued Paul over and over.

Why did Jesus send Paul into the minefield of mission? Is there a purpose in the sending? Verse 18: **To open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in me.** If I grabbed you in the hallway and read most of verse 18 to you: **open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith**, would you say that sounds like something Jesus said in the Gospels or something Paul wrote in his letters? I think it's clear that it sounds like Paul. But what do we see here? He heard it from Jesus.

Paul would go, preach His gospel to city after city, write about it to church after church, in these terms. Those in darkness would receive sight. To the church at Corinth, he wrote, **For God, who said, “Light shall shine out of darkness,” is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ** (2 Cor. 4:6). Heaven has no trouble shining. Men and women's eyes would be opened. And they would turn.

Jesus sent Paul so that they'd turn—not only from darkness to light—but from the dominion of Satan to God. Did this happen? To the church at Colossae, Paul wrote, **giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved**

Son (Col. 1:13). Not only in Colossae, but by the Spirit the Ascended King Jesus transformed city after city in the book of Acts. Men and women bowed the knee to a new Ruler.

Further, Jesus sent Paul, v. 18, **that they may receive forgiveness of sins**. In Corinth, Paul wrote of light shining into hearts. To Colossae, Paul wrote of those turning from the dominion of Satan to God's Kingdom. And to Ephesus Paul wrote, **In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace which He lavished on us** (Eph. 1:7–8). Paul spoke of—and wrote of—what he'd heard promised by Christ, to Corinth, to Colossae, and to Ephesus.

Speaking of, when Paul said farewell to the Ephesian elders, he said these words in Acts 20:32: **And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified**. Where had Paul heard that idea first? Acts 26 tells us he heard it at his commissioning on the road to Damascus. Verse 18: **that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me**. Paul held on to hope because Jesus promised him a future inheritance, an inheritance for those **who have been sanctified by faith in me**. Which is what Jesus prayed for in John 17:19: **For their sakes I sanctify myself, that they themselves also may be sanctified in truth**. This is the effect of the gospel. His life becomes ours. We're made holy by faith in him. Paul would write about that truth repeatedly.

And we're not sanctified, or given this inheritance, *alone*. Verse 18: **they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified**. "Among those" speaks of the Kingdom of people the Ascended Jesus makes holy. He saves us. But He doesn't leave us as orphans. He gifts us a community.

Light instead of darkness, the kingdom of God instead of the kingdom of Satan, forgiveness of sins, brothers and sisters in Christ, made holy, a future unfading inheritance.

Do you ever struggle to believe those things are true?

Conclusion

Paul held on to the promise of hope in part because, again and again, what Jesus told him happened. He recounts in this passage words told him thirty years prior that had been fulfilled repeatedly.

In the book of Acts, Luke's organized the material carefully; and he's included particular details on purpose. Even in *these* moments, among the pomp, before King Agrippa, he wants us to know that Jesus was authoring history. Recall what else Jesus said about Paul in chapter 9. 9:15: **He is a chosen instrument of mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings**. Maybe we think *that* detail is in there by chance. But, in a well-written book, there's purpose to every detail because someone is writing it. Paul speaks before King Agrippa because the author of Acts is God Himself, the One governing all of history.

This includes our own. One difference between feeling as if the mundane details of our lives are meaningless or seeing purpose in the day to day is whether or not we truly believe there's an Author. Might He open our eyes to see our deliverance from darkness, the forgiveness that is ours in Christ, and the inheritance that awaits those whose faith and hope rest completely on Him.