

“THROUGH THE BIBLE”

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ACTS 13-14

Paul was Christianity's most prolific missionary. Throughout the centuries people have marveled at *his brain*, his vast intellect... *his heart*, his deep passion for people... *his shoulders*, his sense of responsibility for the churches... *his back*, the beatings he endured for the sake of the Gospel... But never underestimate **Paul's feet!** Paul crisscrossed the Roman empire four times. In the portion of Acts that covers his travels forty cities are mentioned by name. His three missionary campaigns logged more than 8100 miles and kept him on the road for more than a decade. Imagine all the stamps on Paul's passport!

Author Oswald Sanders once wrote, "Other missionaries have opened continents to the Gospel. Paul opened a world." Tonight we embark on Paul's first missionary journey, which took him nearly three years. It won't take us that long to hit the highlights.

Acts 13, "Now in the church that was at Antioch..." Notice the shift... Up until now the church at Jerusalem had been the center of the Jesus movement. But now headquarters shifts north to the church at Antioch. And *Paul* replaces *Peter* at center stage. Peter was the apostle to the Jews, but Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles. Antioch was the gateway to the west, and became the hub of the Gospel's spread among the Gentiles.

Verse 1, Now "at Antioch there were certain prophets and teachers: The first was "Barnabas..." which means "son of encouragement." In Acts 11 we learned Barnabas was an early leader in the Antioch church. "Simeon who was called Niger..." Simeon's nickname "*Niger*" means "black." He could've been from Africa, or present day Nigeria. "Lucius of Cyrene..." Simon, the man who carried the cross for Jesus was also from Cyrene in North Africa. *Perhaps Simon witnessed to Lucius?*

I think its important to note the role black people played in the early church... Remember, the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8 was a black man. Here two black men lay hands on Paul and launch his ministry. Its interesting that many of the most famous early church fathers were of African descent. Augustine was black. His mother Monica was a Berber, and had dark-skin. Athanasius who helped defeat the Arian heresy was known as "*the black dwarf*" because of his dark skin and small stature. The early apologist, Tertullian, was from North Africa and probably black. Often people are taught that Africans were first exposed to Christianity on the slave plantations of America. Not so. Blacks were among the apostles and prophets who laid the foundation of the Church. In fact, the Gospel came to a *black Africa* years before it arrived in a *white Europe!*

There were two other leaders in Antioch... "Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch..." This Herod was Antipas – the man who beheaded John the Baptist. He married his brother's wife, Herodias, and lived in open, defiant immorality. Jesus called this fellow "a fox." Herod and Manaen started out either close friends or relatives. But their paths split. Manaen's conscience was *saved*. Antipas' became *seared*.

And last on the list... "Saul." Soon his name will change to Paul.

Verse 2, "As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, "Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." The rest of Acts tracks Paul's exploits, all the way to Rome. He shakes the world for Jesus, but it starts at a prayer meeting in Antioch. And notice why the church gathered - "*they ministered to the Lord.*" We think of Paul *ministering for the Lord*, but first he "*ministered to the Lord.*" What a joy it is to know that I, a *finite human being*, can make the *infinite God* happy, just by pouring out my love and singing His praise. God saves us not just to *serve*, but to *be* and *spend time with Him*.

It's interesting to me, the church had gathered not to seek anything *from God* - instead they were just giving *to God* their time, thoughts, and praise. Yet it was on such an occasion that the Holy Spirit spoke to the church, "*separate to me Barnabas and Saul for the work which I have called them.*"

And the question arises, "*How did the Spirit speak?*" An audible voice - handwriting on the wall - maybe just an inner witness... We don't know! But there's a clue. Notice verse 1, some of the men praying were "*prophets.*" The Spirit may've spoke through an extemporaneous message.

"*Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away.*" I like this... Since his conversion, Paul knew he would ministry to the Gentiles, but he waited to go until he was sent by a church. Too many Christians launch ministries on their own without the confirmation and support and prayers of their local church. *Paul didn't just went, he was sent - and behind all his efforts was a praying church.*

"*So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia (the port nearest Antioch), and from there they sailed to Cyprus.*" Cyprus is an island in the Mediterranean Sea - south of Turkey and west of Lebanon. "*And when they arrived in Salamis (the port on the eastern end of the island), they preached the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews.*" This will be Paul's reoccurring pattern. It was modeled after Jesus. In every city, he delivers the Gospel first to the Jews, then to the Gentiles. "*They also had John as their assistant.*" He's called "*Mark*" in Acts 12:25... Colossians 4:10 tells us John Mark was Barnabas' nephew.

Verse 6, "*Now when they had gone through the island to Paphos...*" Paphos was the capitol city - at the west end of the island - 90 miles opposite Salamis. Paul and his pals walked widthwise across Cyprus. And at Paphos "*they found a certain sorcerer, a false prophet, a Jew whose name was Bar-Jesus...*" which is translated, "*son of Jesus.*" "*Who was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, an intelligent man. This man called for Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God.*" Sergius Paulus was the Roman authority on the island. Luke calls him, "*intelligent.*" You show your smarts when you desire to hear God's word.

"*But Elymas the sorcerer (for so his name is translated) withstood them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith.*" "*Elymas*" is Arabic for "*sorcerer.*" This man, Bar-Jesus, was Sergius Paulus' spiritual advisor. He claimed to channel dead spirits and predict the future. He reality he consorted with demons. Bar-Jesus was to Sergius Paulus what Jean Houston was to Hillary Clinton, or Joan Quigley was to Nancy Reagan. It's sad when a public official turns to a psychic, rather than God. Here, Bar-Jesus knows if his client hears God's Word, he's out of a job. Christianity and the occult can never co-exist. *So he opposes Paul...*

Verse 9, "*Then Saul, who also is called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him and said, "O full of all deceit and all fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease perverting the straight ways of the Lord? And now, indeed, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you shall be blind, not seeing the sun for a time."* And immediately a dark mist fell on him, and he went around seeking someone to lead him by the hand. *Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had been done, being astonished at the teaching of the Lord.*" *Here's the kind of teaching that opens the eyes...* It did for the governor. Remember, this is what it took for Paul to see the truth. On the Road to Damascus God blinded him with a bright light. Now he does this sorcerer the same favor. He turns out the *physical lights* to help him see *spiritually*.

Just a side note... It's in verse 9 that Saul's name changes to Paul. "*Saul*" meant "*the requested one.*" Saul was a man in demand. "*Paul*" means "*little.*" And this name marked a change in attitude. Saul went from *haughty* to *humble* – he was no longer big man on campus. Verse 13, "*Now when Paul and his party set sail from Paphos, they came to Perga in Pamphylia...*" They docked on Turkey's southern coast.

"*And John, departing from them, returned to Jerusalem.*" *Why did John Mark leave?* Maybe it was the persecution... or the rigors of travel... Perhaps as a Jew he had his doubts about preaching to Gentiles... The early church father, Chrysostom, said, "*the lad wanted his mother.*" But a more likely answer may be tied to the phrase, "*Paul and his party.*" Up until now its been, "*Barnabas and Saul*", but over the winter they spent in Cyprus, Paul assumed leadership. It was now "*Paul and his party.*"

Later, Paul and Barnabas split company. This may be the first crack in the break-up. Perhaps Mark saw Paul taking charge and was jealous for his uncle. If so, it wasn't the last time *envy* got in the way of *ministry*.

“But when they departed from Perga, they came to Antioch in Pisidia, and went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day and sat down.” There were actually seven Antiochs at the time. It was a popular name. Paul's group had originated at Antioch in Syria, now they're at Antioch in Galatia. *Notice what they've done...* They landed in Perga – a seaside city. But there's no record of any ministry there. Instead they immediately journey 100 miles and climb 3600 feet to the mountain village of Antioch. Why didn't they teach and preach in Perga before the climb?

Paul later writes to these same people. In Galatians 4:13 he pens, **“You know that because of physical infirmity I preached the Gospel to you at the first.”** It seems some physical ailment drove Paul out of the tropical climate of Pamphylia and caused him to seek the higher ground of Galatia. Coastal Turkey was known for a deadly strain of malaria. People who contracted it said it was like a red-hot bar thrust through their forehead. Some early traditions say that Paul's **“thorn in the flesh”** were migraine headaches which could've been caused by this malaria.

In his letter to the Galatians Paul also notes their love for him. He says it was so strong they would've plucked out their eyes and given them to him. Apparently, he needed new eyes. It's reasonable that he suffered some sort of eye disease. Perhaps his condition was tied to the malaria, and triggered by the heat and humidity of the tropical climate next to the ocean. *Something* caused Paul to head straight for Antioch.

He arrived, **“And after the reading of the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent to them, saying, “Men and brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say on.”** Telling a preacher, **“say on...”** is like saying sic'em to a bulldog. **“Then Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand said, “Men of Israel, and you who fear God, listen:”** *Do you know anyone who can't talk without using their hands?* Several times in the book of Acts, Paul motioned with his hands before he spoke.

He speaks to the Jews in verse 17, **“The God of this people Israel chose our fathers, and exalted the people when they dwelt as strangers in the land of Egypt, and with an uplifted arm He brought them out of it. Now for a time of about forty years He put up with their ways in the wilderness. And when He had destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, He distributed their land to them by allotment. After that He gave them judges for about 450 years, until Samuel the prophet. And afterward they asked for a king; so God gave them Saul the son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, for forty years.”** This King Saul lived for the approval of people. The Saul speaking lived only to please his Lord! **“And when He had removed (King Saul), He raised up for them David as king, to whom also He gave testimony and said, ‘I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after My own heart, who will do all My will.’”**

Paul is speaking to Jews so he recounts God's intervention in their history. Remember who else followed this same strategy? *Stephen in Acts 7*. And recall who was in the crowd when Stephen spoke? This same Paul! Paul is following a similar sermon outline as the one used by Stephen. I bet Stephen died wondering if anyone heard a word he said. Well, someone did. Remember God's promise in Isaiah 55:11, **“So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it.”** Share God's Word... it never fails. It always comes home to roost.

In his sermon, Paul gets to King David, **“a man after (God's) own heart.”** He says in verse 23, **“From this man's seed...”** This was the purpose of the genealogies in the early chapters of Luke and Matthew. Jesus was a branch on David's family tree. All Jewish history led up to David's seed! God promised that a descendent of David would be an eternal king. The Hebrews called Him **“Messiah.”** He would deliver Israel and rule the world.

Now Paul points to Jesus, who was **“according to the promise, God raised up for Israel a Savior - Jesus - after John had first preached, before His coming, the baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. And as John was finishing his course, he said, ‘Who do you think I am? I am not He. But behold, there comes One after me, the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to loose.’”** John bowed to none other than Jesus!

Verse 26, **“Men and brethren, sons of the family of Abraham, and those among you who fear God...”** (the God-fearers). In every town there were a few Gentiles, like Cornelius in Acts 10, who sought the one, true God.

Paul is addressing both Jews and God-fearers, to whom “the word of this salvation has been sent. For those who dwell in Jerusalem, and their rulers, because they did not know Him, nor even the voices of the Prophets which are read every Sabbath, have fulfilled *them* in condemning *Him*.” The OT predicted the Messiah would be rejected by His own people. In Psalm 69:8, the Messiah Himself cries out prophetically, “I have become a stranger to My brothers, and an alien to My mother's children.” The Jews who weekly read that prediction fulfilled it anyway.

“And though they found no cause for death *in Him*, they asked Pilate that He should be put to death. Now when they had fulfilled all that was written concerning Him, they took *Him* down from the tree and laid *Him* in a tomb.” Paul says even the crucifixion played out according to God's script. Put Psalm 22, Isaiah 53, and Matthew 27 side by side, and every detail from His *bloody back*, to the *spikes in His hands and feet*, to the *soldiers shooting craps for His coat* – were all foretold by the prophets beforehand.

Verse 30 records the greatest miracle, “But God raised Him from the dead. He was seen for many days by those who came up with Him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are His witnesses to the people. And we declare to you glad tidings - that promise which was made to the fathers. God has fulfilled this for us their children, in that He has raised up Jesus. As it is also written in the second Psalm: ‘*You are My Son, today I have begotten You.*’ This speaks of Jesus’ resurrection. He was “*begotten*” or given life a second time!

“And that He raised Him from the dead, no more to return to corruption, He has spoken thus: ‘*I will give you the sure mercies of David.*’

Understand, other people were raised from the dead. Elisha raised the widow's son. Jesus raised three corpses. In Acts 9 Peter raised a woman. But all these folks were raised to die again. Death was delayed, but not defeated. Their bodies still rot! The only body that refuses to deteriorate belongs to Jesus. His risen body is as alive today, as the day He was born.

Verse 35, “Therefore He also says in another *Psalm* (16:10): ‘*You will not allow Your Holy One to see corruption.*’ “For David, after he had served his own generation by the will of God, fell asleep, was buried with his fathers, and saw corruption; but He whom God raised up saw no corruption.” Obviously the promise wasn't to David. His body turned to ash. God's “*Holy One*” was Jesus. He alone rose to never die again.

“Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins; and by Him everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses.” He tells Jews that observing their own Law won't bring salvation. We're treated *just-as-if-I'd never sinned* by faith, and faith alone. And the resurrection is proof! The fact Jesus overcame *the corrupting effects of sin* was evidence He had authority to forgive *the penalty of sin*.

“Beware therefore, lest what has been spoken in the prophets come upon you: ‘*Behold, you despisers, marvel and perish! For I work a work in your days, a work which you will by no means believe, though one were to declare it to you.*’” This was a quote from Habakkuk 1:5. The marvel God did in Habakkuk's day was to use pagan Gentiles to judge His own people. The marvel in Paul's day, went a step further, He saved those Gentiles. And Paul is warning the Jews, “*don't harden your heart and miss out on God's miracle.*” God is changing programs. The requirement is no longer keeping the Law, but faith. And the offer is not only to Jews, but Gentiles.

“So when the Jews went out of the synagogue, the Gentiles begged that these words might be preached to them the next Sabbath. Now when the congregation had broken up, many of the Jews and devout proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas, who, speaking to them, persuaded them to continue in the grace of God.” Yet if you read the book of Galatians you know the Jews failed to continue in grace. They embraced Jesus, but thought to please God they had to add elements of Judaism. *They assumed Jesus was not enough*... You needed to be circumcised, worship on the Sabbath, eat a kosher diet. The Jews who developed the poisonous mixture of works and grace were called Judaizers... They had a “*Grace Plus*” theology... *to be right with God it takes grace plus (blank)*. Paul encourages true believers in Galatians 5:1 to reject the Judaizers, and stand in grace, “*Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage.*”

Verse 44, “On the next Sabbath almost the whole city came together to hear the word of God. But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy; and contradicting and blaspheming, they opposed the things spoken by Paul.”

The Jews argued among themselves. Paul actually drew a crowd. The whole city came to hear him. It made the Jews jealous. I like this definition, "Envy is the consuming desire to have everybody else as unsuccessful as you are." Often jealousy can derail a move of God.

"Then Paul and Barnabas grew bold and said, "It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; but since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us:" And he quotes Isaiah 49:6. *'I have set you as a light to the Gentiles, that you should be for salvation to the ends of the earth.'* The Jews were suppose to be a light to the Gentiles, not an obstacle. "Now when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and glorified the word of the Lord." God desires to save all people. "And as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed." What an interesting verse after verse 48. God desires to save everyone, but not everyone gets saved. *The Bible teaches human free will, but also divine election.* We get a choice and God gets a choice. That means everyone who ends up saved was *chosen by God and made the right choice.*

Verse 49 "And the word of the Lord was being spread throughout all the region. But the Jews stirred up the devout and prominent women and the chief men of the city, raised up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region." The mob pressured city hall, who forced Paul and Barnabas to leave. *God's men split. God's Word spreads.* "But they shook off the dust from their feet against them, and came to Iconium. And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit." I love this, they got run out of town, but didn't get down. They shook off the dust, and looked for the wind! You don't get down when you're filled with joy and the Spirit. They trusted God to keep fresh wind in their sails. Whenever you're rejected for Jesus sake, don't dwell on it – just shake it off and move on. *You'll never get shook up, if you learn to shake off...*

Chapter 14, "Now it happened in Iconium (90 miles up the road from Antioch) that they went together to the synagogue of the Jews, and so spoke that a great multitude both of the Jews and of the Greeks believed. But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brethren." This was a serious sin. It's been said, "The only thing better than going to heaven is taking someone with you. But the only thing worse than going to hell is also taking someone with you." And these Jews were doing the latter. They were sabotaging the salvation of the Gentiles by stirring up rumors and gossip against Paul. Gossip is an awful sin, especially when directed at God's messenger. When you sour a person's attitude with baseless accusations about a pastor or church, you cripple their ability to receive God's Word. You harm them spiritually. It can even cost them their salvation. Guard your tongue!

"Therefore they stayed there a long time, speaking boldly in the Lord, who was bearing witness to the word of His grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands." Miracles were occurring in Iconium. "But the multitude of the city was divided: part sided with the Jews, and part with the apostles." Sometimes we think all discord must be the devil. But sometimes it's the Gospel. Jesus said, Luke 12:51, "Do you suppose that I came to give peace on earth? I tell you, not at all, but rather division." Men are *reconciled in Christ*, but they're first *divided by Christ*. You're either *in Christ* or *outside Christ* – *lost or found - a saint or an ain't.*

Verse 5, "And when a violent attempt was made by both the Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to abuse and stone them, they became aware of it and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding region. And they were preaching the gospel there." Paul was booted about more times than a football. *Lystra* is 18 miles SW of Iconium.

"And in Lystra a certain man without strength in his feet was sitting, a cripple from his mother's womb, who had never walked." It wasn't that he couldn't walk, he had never walked. He'd been born with a birth defect. "This man heard Paul speaking. Paul, observing him intently and seeing that he had faith to be healed, said with a loud voice, "Stand up straight on your feet!" What tipped Paul off to the crippled man's faith we're not sure. Perhaps it was the gift of discernment or knowledge. Whatever it was, Paul ordered the man to his feet... "And he leaped and walked." A miracle!

Verse 11, "Now when the people saw what Paul had done, they raised their voices, saying in the Lycaonian *language*, "The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!" And Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker."

Remember, when Paul arrived in Antioch and Iconium he went first to the Jewish synagogue, but in Lystra there is no synagogue. There were few Jews living in the city. Unlike the bigger cities, Lystra was backwoods. It was a hick town. The folks in Lystra were uneducated and superstitious. They were simple and excitable. They worshipped the Greek pantheon of gods and walked on pins and needles not to offend one. That's what motivated them here...

The Roman poet Ovid told a tale about a couple who lived in the region around Lystra. The Greek gods Zeus and Hermes came to earth disguised as humans. Everywhere they journeyed they were shunned, until they came to the hut of two peasants. This couple showed great hospitality. Afterwards, the two travelers took the couple to the top of a mountain where they saw the people of the region wiped out, but their hut turned into a beautiful temple. The couple became caretakers of the temple. When they died they were transformed into two trees planted by its entrance. These residents of Lystra were into this kind of mythology and didn't want to make the same mistake. Because of the miracle they assumed once again the gods had come incognito. Paul did most of the talking, so they figured he was Hermes, the messenger god, and Barnabas was Zeus.

“Then the priest of Zeus, whose temple was in front of their city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates, intending to sacrifice with the multitudes. But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard this, they tore their clothes and ran in among the multitude, crying out and saying, “Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men with the same nature as you, and preach to you that you should turn from these useless things to the living God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and all things that are in them...” I believe, this is the most dangerous moment in Paul's life! Forget the stonings, and beatings, and jailings, and shipwrecks... this was the most potentially lethal moment he faced...

When explorer, James Cook, came to the Hawaiian islands the natives thought he was their god, Lono. Rather than correcting the assumption he enjoyed the ruse. For weeks he was treated like a god. Natives catered to his every whim. One night he was about to take advantage of another woman when her husband snuck up and clubbed him over the head. The blow staggered Cook. He started to bleed and moan. He eventually passed out. The islanders rightly concluded that gods don't bleed, so when Cook woke up they accused him of deceit and murdered him on the spot. Paul could've pulled a James Cook and enjoyed the perks. But how quickly he diffused any misconceptions. He set the record straight. He's just a man. They need to turn from their worthless myths to the living God. But I wonder, if given the same opportunity, how many of us would pull a James Cook and bask in the limelight reserved only for God? We all can be tempted. This is why our most dangerous moments are not the down times, but when people sing our praises, and think more highly of us than they should. Remember, “*Paul*” changed his name to “*small*” for a reason. It was a constant reminder *that it's all about God*.

Paul continues with a sermon about the living God... “Who in bygone generations allowed all nations to walk in their own ways. Nevertheless He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good, gave us rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness.” In Antioch Paul spoke to Jews and preached Christ by rehearsing Israel's history. Here he's speaking to Gentiles, so he starts with creation. Paul is an example. He tailors his witness to his audience's frame of reference. They knew nothing of Israeli history, but they knew the seasons.

“And with these sayings they could scarcely restrain the multitudes from sacrificing to them.” They were in a frenzy. Reason wasn't guiding them. “Then Jews from Antioch and Iconium came there; and having persuaded the multitudes, they stoned Paul *and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead.*” Here's proof of the crowd's fickleness. Up until now they're one step away from offering a sacrifice to Paul. But the Jews who opposed him at Antioch and Iconium finally arrive, and they start mixing with the crowd. They play on their superstitions and fears. It doesn't take long for them to turn a *worship service* into a *lynching*.

This happens more than you think. Every day the media uses it's ability to shape public perception to create heroes and villains. They can alter a person's image without a change ever taking place in their character. This is what happened to Paul. The pagans made him *more than he was* - the Jews made him *less than he was* - thus, he went from *hero to bozo* in minutes. *Paul went from receiving sacrifices to being a sacrifice.*

Verse 20, “However, when the disciples gathered around him...” Imagine this scene... Paul's friends gathered round to plan the funeral. They're checking his wallet to see if he's an organ donor. Notifying the next of kin. Sizing him up for new suit. They think that he's dead... When all of a sudden, “*He rose up and went into the city...*” What they thought was a corpse staggers to his feet, balances himself, brushes off the dust and blood, and heads back into the city to finish his sermon!

Here's a guy with guts! His enemies asked, "How do you stop a man like this?" The answer is, "You don't!" Paul was *devoted* and *determined*

"And the next day he departed with Barnabas to Derbe." Years later Paul writes to the Corinthians about a special experience. In 2 Corinthians 12:4 Paul says he "was caught up into paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter." He visits heaven. He saw sights words failed to express. He wasn't even sure if he was "in the body or out of the body" – was it a vision or had he died?

Jewish literature records four rabbis who caught a glimpse of Paradise. The first, *Rabbi Azzai*, looked and died. The second, *Rabbi Zoma*, looked and went nuts. The third, *Rabbi Abayah* lacked the wisdom to handle the knowledge. He became prideful, and turned into a heretic. Only *Rabbi Aqiba* survived the experience unscathed. Some of us bemoan the fact that the Bible doesn't tell us more about heaven. I think the problem isn't God's reluctance to *reveal*, but our inability to *receive*. Heaven is too heavy a reality for mortal men to handle.

What's significant about Paul's revelation in 2 Corinthians is that he pinpoints the time of his vision to his first missionary journey into Galatia. Remember, Stephen saw heaven opened while he was being stoned. Perhaps the heavens also open to Paul, during his stoning at Lystra.

Verse 21, "And when they had preached the gospel to that city (Derbe), and made many disciples..." The Jews didn't follow Paul to Derbe. Here he was finally able to minister to the Gentiles without Jewish interference. Then "they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch (went right back the way they came), strengthening the souls of the disciples..." It would've been closer to go east over the Tarsus mountains to Antioch, but they backtracked to organize churches and strengthen the believers in the faith. "Exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, "We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God." Persecution is part of every disciple's training. As the poem puts it, "Can he have followed far, who has no wound, no scar?" Real faith is persevering faith. It keeps on keeping on.

Later, in Galatians 6, Paul's readers, these same people, were questioning his sincerity, but he answers by recalling his stoning in Lystra. "Let no one trouble me, for I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus." If anyone doubts Paul's love for Jesus just take a look at his scars. One young man was influenced by those scars. Paul reminds Timothy in 2 Timothy 4 he was a witness to this stoning. Lystra was Timothy's hometown. Timothy saw Paul's faithfulness in the face of persecution.

"So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed." Notice Paul appointed the elders. In Acts 6 the deacons were selected by the church, but the elders were *and are* selected by the other elders.

"And after they had passed through Pisidia, they came to Pamphylia. Now when they had preached the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia." Notice, this time Paul preaches in the city of Perga. "From there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work which they had completed." They're back. "Now when they had come and gathered the church together, they reported all that God had done with them, and that He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. So they stayed there a long time with the disciples." Their first journey lasted three years. And they won't be resting for long. They'll be off again - but first, a pastors conference in Jerusalem.