

- We have been talking about eschatology and end-times this summer and today we are going to discuss one phenomenon that intersects with our previous discussions about what we have called the intermediate state, or more specifically, what happens when we die.
- I don't think I have to convince you of the popularity of near death experiences within Christian circles, but let me give you a few stats:
 - Don Piper's *90 Minutes in Heaven* has 4 million currently in print and appeared on the bestseller lists of the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *Publisher's Weekly*.
 - *Heaven is for Real* by Todd Burpo was released in 2010 and by 2013 had sold 7.5 million copies after 22 printings. It reaches the no. 1 on both *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestseller lists. The movie, according to one website (the-numbers.com), has grossed more than 100 million dollars in box office and DVD sales.
 - *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon's Journey into the Afterlife* and *To Heaven and Back: A Doctor's Extraordinary Account of her Death* both come across with the authority of the medical community and have sold collectively about 3 million copies and have been featured in documentaries and Hallmark movies.
- A 2013 Pew Research study showed that about 80% of Americans believe in "heaven." What do you think that means?
- **What comes to mind when you think about NDEs?**
 - Characteristics: a sense of being outside one's physical body, sometimes perceiving it from an outside position; a sense of movement through darkness or a tunnel; intense emotions; heightened perceptions; experiencing a great light or darkness; perceiving a spiritual realm, which may include vividly memorable landscapes; encounters with deceased loved ones, spiritual beings and/or religious figures; knowledge of the nature of the universe; a life review; a sense of oneness and interconnectedness; a border of no return; a sense of having knowledge of the future; messages regarding life's purpose (International Association of Near Death Studies).
 - No two experiences are exactly the same (over 800 cases studied) and the most common experience is a warm, comforting light.
- **Why do you think people are so drawn to these types of books?**

- Ultimately, what can be drawn from all of these stories is that we human beings are *dualistic* beings, that is, we are body and soul.
- I believe that many Christians are drawn to these types of stories because they truly do want to know about heaven. However, I think they also reveal a deep-seated doubt that we wrestle with living in this materialistic and atheistic culture. Scientists and medical researchers tell us we are nothing but lab chemicals arranged by the creative powers of evolution, and we have to fight to not believe them. And these types of stories serve to help our internal and external defense against such anti-supernaturalism.
- These books and testimonies do seem to point to the reality of human consciousness that is not tied to our bodies. And I do not doubt that some people have read them and started to ask questions about the condition of their soul. Indeed, Col 3:1-2 tells us to set our minds on things above where Christ is. And of course, I do believe that heaven *is for real*.
- However there are some serious and deeply concerning problems with many of these accounts.
- **Biblical Assessment**
 - At least 10 resurrection accounts in the Bible and none of them recount information about heaven.
 - The widow's son (cf. 1 Ki. 17:17–24)
 - The Shunammite's child (cf. 2 Ki. 4:32–37)
 - The dead man who touched Elisha's bones (cf. 2 Ki. 13:21)
 - Jairus' daughter (cf. Matt. 9:18–26; Mark 5:21–43; Luke 8:40–56)
 - The widow's son (cf. Luke 7:11–16)
 - Unnamed saints (cf. Matt. 27:52–53)
 - Jesus (cf. Matt. 28; Mark 16; Luke 24; John 20–21)
 - Lazarus (cf. John 11:1–44)
 - Dorcas (cf. Acts 9:36–41)
 - Eutychus (cf. Acts 20:9–12).
 - Those who had visions of heaven in Scripture include: Micaiah (cf. 2 Chron. 18:18), Isaiah (cf. Isa. 6:1–4), Ezekiel (cf. Ezek. 1, 10), Daniel (cf. Dan. 7:7–10), Paul (cf. **2 Cor. 12:1–4**), Stephen (cf. **Acts 7:55**), and John (cf. Rev. 4–6).
 - The death of Stephen in Acts 7:54ff. records the only NDE experience in the Bible, if we define it like the modern term. Stephen looks up into heaven moments before his death and does not see report seeing a light, or ancestor, or a family pet—he sees Jesus standing at the right hand of God.
 - A commonality among those who have visions of heaven in Scripture is fear, reverence, and worship. Ezekiel, Daniel, and John all saw a vision of the Lord and fell on their faces (Ezek 1:28; Dan 10:9; Rev 1:17). The

focus of heaven in the Bible is God and his glory. One major danger in the NDEs is the extreme man-centeredness of the accounts. Many are very gospel-less emphasizing the idea that “good people go to heaven.”

- The Bible speaks very plainly and negatively about consulting the dead in an effort to better understand things. Deut 18:10-12 and Lev 20:27 strongly prohibit necromancy and speaking with dead. Jesus tells the story about Lazarus and the rich man in Hades in Luke 16. In verses 27-31 the rich man asks Abraham to send the deceased Lazarus to his family so he can tell them the reality of judgment. **How does Abraham respond in the text? What does this tell us about how we should prioritize Scripture and testimonies from beyond the grave? Does it seem like God’s strategy to bolster our faith by sending someone to “heaven” and have them come back?**

- **How do we respond to these types of accounts?**
 - 1 John 4:1 tells us to test the spirits because deception is a reality and we have a real enemy that is described as “the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph 6:12). 2 Cor 11:14 tells us that Satan himself disguises himself as an angel of light.

 - Tim Challies.com: “I am not going to review *To Heaven and Back*. It’s pure junk, fiction in the guise of biography, paganism in the guise of Christianity.” We are under no obligation to believe the stories these people tell, even if they are very sincere in their relaying them.

- **Recommended Resources**
 - *Heaven* by Randy Alcorn
 - “Near Death Experiences” by David W. Jones (<http://erlc.com/documents/pdf/near-death-experiences.pdf>)
 - *Heaven: Your Real Home* by Joni Erickson Tada
 - *Afterlife: What You Really Want to Know About Heaven and the Hereafter* by Hank Hannegraaff