

Imagine Heaven – Evidence for the Afterlife September 27, 2015

Everybody wonders—What happens when we die? Is there a God, Is Heaven real, and if so, does Heaven have a plan for me? It's a HUGE topic in our culture—scan the songs, books, movies, cable channels you'll find curiosity about the afterlife, spirits, near death experiences, and heaven. And yet, while we're curious, we're also in denial—we don't want to think about death, even though there's a really high % chance it's gonna happen!

Three guys were playing poker one night, and one asked “What do you want people to say at your funeral?” One said, “I want them to say I was a brilliant doctor saved many lives.” The other said, “I want them to say I was a devoted, loving father to my kids.” The third one said, “I want them to say ‘Look— he's moving!’” Believe it or not, more and more are saying, “Look he's moving.” Gallup poll and other studies estimate 13 million Americans (1/25) have had a Near Death Experience (NDE)—where some have no heartbeat, no brain waves—yet modern medicine brought them back. [This is not new; Jesus brought Lazarus and Jairus' daughter back]. What they say they experienced on the other side is hard to believe for some— some reject the data outright. As Paul Merrill noted, “If you eliminate data that do not agree, the remaining data agree very well.” But that doesn't lead to truth—and if we're willing to consider what modern medical evidence says, this life does not end, it's just the beginning to the real story and the real life more exhilarating than anything we've imagined (God's been telling us that all along). That's what we're going to explore in the next 6 weeks—and every week I'll interview very credible people who died: a Doctor, College Professor, Commercial Airline pilot, Pastor, and others who clinically died, resuscitated, and tell what they experienced. [Not gonna want to miss any]

Nearly 35 years ago, my dad was dying of cancer, and I picked up a book someone had given him called *Life After Life*—the book that coined the term Near Death Experience (NDE). I read it cover

to cover that night. At the time, I didn't really believe in God, Jesus, or the afterlife—I only believed in the next party. But death was knocking on our door, so I read it, and I was blown away. That night I said, “Whoa, maybe God is real—if so, I’ve got to find out.” The next year I started studying the scriptures with a small group of people, and I found faith. While studying engineering at the University of Texas, I also studied reasons to believe and found incredible historical evidence that God really has been revealing himself. Since then, I eventually left my career in engineering to start Gateway for skeptics and doubters like me to “Come as you are” and explore faith. I’ve also read close to 1000 accounts of near-death experiences over the years, and I’ve come to the conclusion they reveal what the scriptures already say—but in a way that helps us Imagine how great it’s going to be. That’s why I wrote *Imagine Heaven*—if you’re still skeptical, I think you’ll see incredible evidence that Heaven is Real. And if you’re a Christian, I hope you’ll see HOW REAL it is and live for it. So today, I want to give you an overview of the book and what we’ll cover in more depth the next 5 weeks. Let me say, I’m skeptical of any one story—some say bizarre things. Each is interpreting something hard to describe, so it’s dangerous to take a few stories to form your view of the Afterlife. I tried to look at the common elements across 1000s of stories (I include 120 in *Imagine Heaven*) and show how they line up with the scriptures, and it’s pretty compelling. When you start to imagine it, it changes how you live today for the better.

So Imagine for a second—it’s that point of life you most feared, you breath your last breathe. What people report is that to their surprise, they leave their body but many remain in the same vicinity, looking down on their lifeless body. They’re **out of body in a new body**. And to their surprise, they can’t tell if they’re dead because they feel more alive and more themselves than ever. What they thought would be scary is invigorating. This is what people described to skeptical Cardiologists, Oncologists, and other

Doctors who revived them, began to convince many skeptical doctors that there is an Afterlife. Listen to how Cardiologist Dr. Michael Sabom describes what changed his mind: “Before talking with Pete, and scores like him,” Sabom says, “I didn’t believe there was such a thing as a near-death experience... [Pete] told me he had left his body during his first cardiac arrest and had watched the resuscitation. When I asked him to tell me what exactly he saw, he described the resuscitation with such detail and accuracy that I could have later used the tape to teach physicians.” Sabom says, “These people, like Pete Morton, saw details of their resuscitation that they could not otherwise have seen. One patient noticed the physician who failed to wear scuffs over his white, patent-leather shoes during open-heart surgery. In many cases I was able to confirm the patient’s testimony with medical records and with hospital staff.” I talked to Dr. Sabom, and he said he studied NDEs to refute them, “I wanted to see if it would pass scientific muster. It did. After five years of research, I published my findings in the book *Recollections of Death*.” He also published his findings in the Journal of American Medical Association (JAMA).

A radiation Oncologist, Dr. Long, read his findings in JAMA. He found it hard to believe, until one night at dinner with friends, Sheila mentioned a food allergy that made her code once (her heart stopped). Dr. Long decided to probe “Did anything happen to you when you coded?” Hesitantly Sheila said “yes, I found myself at ceiling level. I could see the EKG machine I was hooked to. The EKG was flatlined. The doctors and nurses were frantically trying to bring me back to life. The scene below me was a near-panic situation. In contrast to the chaos below, I felt a profound sense of peace. I was completely free of any pain. My consciousness drifted out of the operating room and moved into a nursing station. I immediately recognized that this was the nursing station on the floor where I had been prior to my surgery. From my vantage point near the ceiling, I saw the nurses bustling about performing their daily duties. After I watched the nurses a while, a tunnel opened

up. I was drawn to the tunnel. I then passed through the tunnel and became aware of a bright light at the end of the tunnel. I felt peaceful. After I passed through the tunnel, I found myself in an area of beautiful, mystical light. In front of me were several of my beloved relatives who had previously died. It was a joyous reunion, and we embraced. I found myself with a mystical being of overwhelming love and compassion. “Do you want to go back?” He asked. I responded, “I don’t know,” which was just like my old indecisive self at the time. After further discussion, I knew the choice to return to my physical body was mine. It was a most difficult decision. I was in a realm of overwhelming love. In this realm I knew I was truly home. Finally, I returned to my body. I awoke in the ICU over a day later. I had tubes and wires all over me. I could not talk about my profound experience.”

Since then, Dr. Long has collected and scientifically studied thousands of accounts from around the world, some of which I explore in *Imagine Heaven*. He concludes: **“By studying thousands of detailed accounts of NDErs, I found the evidence that led to this astounding conclusion: NDEs provide such powerful scientific evidence that it is reasonable to accept the existence of an afterlife.”** Dr. Jeff Long In the book I report many more skeptical doctors who were convinced by people reporting things they could not have seen while dead.

The Lancet, one of the most prestigious medical journals, published another account of a patient having a cardiac arrest and not breathing. “At the time that a tube was being placed in the airway to ventilate [the patient], it was noted he had upper dentures. The dentures were removed and placed in a crash-cart drawer while the patient was deeply comatose. Over a week later the patient reported having an [out-of-body experience] and accurately described the room he was resuscitated in and the people present. Remarkably, he declared that his lost dentures could be found in the crash-cart drawer.”

What convinced so many skeptical doctors were verifiable details these clinically dead people described that they couldn't possibly have seen unless they really observed from another vantage point outside their lifeless body (adults and children). J. M. Holden, a professor of psychology, studied ninety- three NDE patients who claimed to make verifiable observations while out of their physical bodies. "Of these out-of-body perceptions, 92 percent were completely accurate, 6 percent contained some error, and only 1 percent was completely erroneous."

When you die, you leave this body behind, but you are still you—in a new spiritual body. Science tells us single skin cell of your physical body dies and gets replaced every 2 weeks—you're not the same physical body this month you were last month (so whatever "you" are is not just physical). That's what the Bible has told us for 1000s of years. The apostle Paul, was a Jewish Pharisee who was killing Christians for claiming Jesus was the Messiah—until on the Damascus road he encountered a Man of Blinding Light (just like many NDErs report as we'll see), he realized Jesus was who he claimed. [But seeing is NOT believing—Paul still had to decide if he would follow Jesus, which is true of NDE people—they still have a choice]. But Paul goes on to start churches across the Roman empire, and in Acts 14 it appears Paul may have had a near-death experience when he got stoned [to death]. **They stoned Paul and dragged him out of town, thinking he was dead. But as the believers gathered around him, he got up and went back into the town. Acts 14:19-20** Listen to what Paul later says: **I was caught up to the third heaven fourteen years ago. Whether I was in my body or out of my body, I don't know —only God knows...But I do know that I was caught up to paradise and heard things so astounding that they cannot be expressed in words, things no human is allowed to tell. 2 Corinthians 12:2-4** Paul later explains when we die, we get new bodies—an upgrade, version 2.0. **Our bodies are buried in brokenness, but they will be raised in glory. They are buried in weakness, but they will**

be raised in strength. 44 They are buried as natural human bodies, but they will be raised as spiritual bodies. 1

Corinthians 15:43-44 We will explore more about our bodies next week—but we will be ourselves, in fact, you'll be more yourself than ever.

More Alive than Ever – People consistently say they felt more alive than ever. When most people imagine Heaven, I find they imagine something less real, less tangible, kind of fuzzy, ethereal, cloudy, boring. I remember a far side Cartoon that had two guys sitting on the edge of a cloud whistling and one guy says, “I wish I’d brought a magazine.” We have these horrible views of Heaven—people picture an endless church service—that sounds bad to me. The truth is, this life gets boring and frustrating it’s not what we were created for. It’s the shadow of the real life to come. **They serve in a system of worship that is only a copy, a shadow of the real one in heaven. Hebrews 8:5**

Don Piper—pronounced dead for 90 minutes by EMS after an 18 wheeler ran over the top of his car, said of Heaven: “As I looked around, I could hardly grasp the vivid, dazzling colors. Every hue and tone surpassed anything I had ever seen. With all the heightened awareness of my senses, I felt as if I had never seen, heard, or felt anything so real before.” Imagine that day you leave this earth, suddenly you find yourself with not just 5 senses, but many more senses—all heightened in experience. It’s so thrilling, you don’t ever want to stop the adventure and exploration of this new world. Enhanced vision—you can see up close or very far away, new vibrant colors, and a light unlike any on earth. Even blind people report “seeing” the same things.

Vicki, who was blind from birth, flatlined after a bad car accident. She had a hard time adjusting to visual perception, but realized she was looking down at the doctors working on her body: “Then I finally recognized my wedding ring and my hair.” Her hair was down to her waist and her wedding ring had orange blossoms on it,

so she identified both. “And I thought: *Is this my body down there? And am I dead or what?* They were trying to frantically work on this thing that I discovered was my body, and I felt very detached from it and I thought, *I’m out of here, I can’t get these people to listen to me.* As soon as I thought that, I went up through the ceiling as if it were nothing. And it was wonderful to be out there and be free, not worry about bumping into anything, and I knew where I was going. And I heard this sound of wind chimes that was the most incredible sound that I can describe.” Vicki noticed that she was fully herself, and had a distinct form and a non-physical body she said “was made of light.” Then she found herself going up through a dark enclosure, “like a tube.” she heard sublimely beautiful and exquisitely harmonious music she said transitioned into songs of praise to God. As she reached the opening of the tube, she found herself on grass. Trees and flowers and a vast number of people surrounded her in a place of tremendous light, and the light, Vicki said, “was something you could feel as well as see.” Even the people she saw were bright. “Everybody there was made of light. And I was made of light. What the light conveyed was love. There was love everywhere. It was like love came from the grass, love came from the birds, love came from the trees. It was incredible, really beautiful, and I was overwhelmed by that experience because I couldn’t really imagine what light was like. It’s still . . . a very emotional thing when I talk about this.”

What’s amazing is Vicki and other blind people describe light coming out of things rather than shining on things—it’s what the Bible teaches, but how would blind people get that idea? Jesus said “I am the Light of the world,” John sees in Heaven **the city has no need of sun or moon, for the glory of God illuminates the city, and the Lamb [Jesus] is its light. The nations will walk in its light. Revelation 21:23-24** In the Old Testament, an angel told the prophet Daniel: **[The dead] will rise up, some to everlasting life and some to shame and everlasting disgrace...and those who lead many to righteousness will shine like the stars forever.**

Daniel 12:2-3 Vicki and others describe this Light that is life and love. Vibrant colors, indescribable music, and Time and travel on another dimension.

Harvard Neursurgeon Eben Alexander believed when the brain shut down, consciousness ended— then his brain crashed and he had an experience of a horrible place and also a place of untold beauty and said, “In the worlds above this one, time simply doesn’t behave as it does here...A moment can seem like a lifetime, and one or several lifetimes can seem like a moment.” It’s exactly what the Bible says: **With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. 2 Peter 3:8** But if that seems weird or scary—it’s not—in fact, what people say is, it’s home. It’s where we belong. And we won’t be alone.

Heaven was meant for relationship. Those who get a glimpse of Heaven agree on one thing more than anything—love is the point of it all. To love God and love people is what the prophets and Jesus taught sums up the Bible. So if love and relationship is the goal of life on earth, why would we think God wants to tear that apart or take relationship from us in Heaven? Nothing could be further from the truth.

Marv Besteman, a Bank President, died in the hospital and recalls a welcome party consisting of close relatives, and those who had spiritually influenced him or he them. “Both of my friends were prayer warriors, and we had spent many hours praying together. I’m not sure if this is why God chose these two guys for me to see—they were significant to me and my spiritual life. Everyone I saw had been influential in shaping my life in some way.” A woman who died giving birth said: “I recognized my grandmother and a girl I had known when I was in school, and many other relatives and friends. . . . It was a very happy occasion, and I felt that they had come to protect or to guide me. It was almost as if I were coming home, and they were there to greet or to welcome me.”

A word of warning. Don't take a few people's experiences and develop a view of the Afterlife because God's given us a bigger understanding from Scripture. Many talk about people there to protect, as we'll see, just because people get a peek into the Afterlife—it doesn't mean it's all good or that's the whole picture—you're just seeing a small glimpse of a vast world. Like everyone sees one side of **Mt. Rushmore PIC**—there's another side people don't see (**Mt. Rushmore BUTTS PIC**). In *Imagine Heaven* I try to show there's a lot more to the Afterlife than one story shows. Jesus said, **“Use your worldly resources to benefit others and make friends. Then, when your earthly possessions are gone, they will welcome you to an eternal home” Luke 16:9.** God intended Relationships to last—to go to new depths with each other in Heaven—He created us for relationship, first with Himself.

A Being of Light and a Life Review. What's amazing is how people around the globe, young and old, consistently describe this Being of Light who they know to be God—those who follow Jesus know He's Jesus, some don't know who He is, but it's who they describe. Dr. George Ritchie, a psychiatrist at U of Virginia died of pneumonia—has the death certificate to prove it. He didn't realize he was dead looking at his body. Then a light came into the room. “It was impossibly bright: it was like a million welders' lamps. I thought “I'm glad I don't have physical eyes at this moment, this light would destroy the retina in a tenth of a second.” No, I corrected myself, not the light. He. He would be too bright to look at. For now I saw that it was not light but a Man who had entered the room, or rather, a Man made out of light.” He knew it was Jesus, whom he had learned about in Sunday School, gentle, meek, kind of a weakling. “But this person was Power itself fused together with an unconditional love that overwhelmed me...An astonishing love. A love beyond my wildest imagining. This love knew every unlovable thing about me—the quarrels with my stepmother, my explosive temper, the sex thoughts I could never

control, every mean, selfish thought and action since the day I was born—and accepted and loved me just the same. When I say He knew everything about me, this was simply an observable fact. For into that room along with His radiant presence—simultaneously, also entered every single episode of my entire life. Everything that had ever happened to me was simply there, in full view, all seemingly taking place at that moment. How this was possible I did not know. . . Transfixed, I stared at myself standing at the blackboard in a third-grade, Receiving my Eagle badge. Wheeling Papa Dabney onto the verandah. . . . hundreds, thousands of scenes, all illuminated by that searing Light, in an existence where time seemed to have ceased.”

What’s amazing is how consistent this is—this life review in the presence of this Man of Light, who is unconditional love, yet who knows everything—every thought, every motive, every deed. Across the globe, 1000s report this Life Review with this Being of Light who IS love. But it’s just exactly what we should expect. “God is love” said the Apostle John. Jesus claimed to demonstrate the love of God is for all humanity—to enter our suffering and pay for our wrongs. Jesus also said, **There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known.** **Matthew 10:26** Scripture says, **Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait until the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of the heart. At that time each will receive their praise from God.** **1 Corinthians 4:5** We will look more at what this Life review means in weeks to come—but one thing to note--God wants to reward us. He wants it to be a time of great celebration and reward for a life lived in loving faithfulness to him and our fellow man. And it’s not too late for any of us—that’s what’s amazing, as we’ll see. God is the God of compassion, mercy and grace—he’s the God of the second chance. And No one loves you more!

But don’t just take my word for it, I want you to hear from a

skeptical Doctor with us today: Watch This...[MARY NEAL]