

Stars... We're all searching for something—the question is “What are we searching for that will fill that void inside?” I was talking with Brian, Gateway Branson's pastor, and he asked if Heaven had an “All you can eat chocolate chip cookie and pizza bar”—some of us are searching for the wrong things! Twenty-year-old Ian McCormack set out from New Zealand in search of the perfect wave, the perfect high, the perfect girl, and the surfer's life traveling throughout Australia, and Indonesia—two years in search of pleasure. One night while scuba diving in the Indian Ocean, a school of box jellyfish stung Ian four times—and one sting was deadly! In the ambulance on the way to the hospital, Ian's life began to vividly replay before his eyes.

“I lay there wondering what would happen if I died?” Then I saw a clear vision of my mother saying, “Ian, no matter how far from God you are, no matter what you've done wrong, if you cry out to God from your heart, he will hear you and he will forgive you.” In my heart I was thinking, *Do I believe there is a God? Am I going to pray?* I'd almost become a devout atheist. Yet, I was confronted by this vision of my mother.”

“I didn't know what to pray or whom to pray to. Which god should I pray to? Buddha? Kali? Shiva? Yet my mother followed Jesus Christ. I wondered what I should pray.” The Lord's Prayer his mom had taught him came to mind, “Forgive us our sins” came to his mind. “Lord, I've done so many wrong things,” Ian admitted. “I don't know how you can forgive me, but please forgive me.” The next line came up: “As we forgive those who've sinned against us.” Ian thought, “Well I don't hold grudges. . . . Then I heard this question, ‘Will you forgive the Indian that pushed you out of the car and the Chinese men that wouldn't take you to the hospital?’ Ian thought, “You must be joking!” But no more lines would come. Ian realized, if God could forgive him, he must also forgive others. Line by line he prayed the Lord's prayer. Then Ian slipped away.

At first, Ian found himself fully alive, but in utter darkness that terrified him. We will explore this often overlooked hellish NDE next week. Ian describes what happened next: “I was weeping by now and I cried out to God, “Why am I here, I've asked you for forgiveness, why am I here?” Then a brilliant light shone upon me and literally drew me out of the darkness. . . . I could see that the source of the light was emanating from the very end of the tunnel. It looked unspeakably bright, as if it was the centre of the universe... more brilliant than the sun... Yet you could look right into it. . . .the light wasn't just material in nature but was a “living light” that transmitted an emotion, and filled me with a sense of love and acceptance. . . I came out of the end of the tunnel and seemed to be standing upright before the source of all the light and power. It looked like a white fire or a mountain of cut diamonds sparkling with the most indescribable brilliance. . . .

As I stood there, questions began racing, “Is this just a force, as the Buddhists say, or karma or Yin and Yang? could there actually be someone standing in there?” As I thought these thoughts, a voice spoke to me from the centre of the light. It was the same voice that I had heard earlier [guiding his prayer]. The voice said, “Ian, do you wish to return? . . .” I replied, “If I am out of my body I don't know where I am, I wish to return.” The response from this person was, “If you wish to return Ian you must see in a new light.” The moment I heard the words “see in a new light,” something clicked. I remembered a Christmas card, “Jesus is the light of the world”, and “God is light and there is no darkness in him.” . . . So this was God! He is light. He knew my name and he knew the secret thoughts of my heart and mind... You can wear masks before other people but you can't wear a mask before God. I felt ashamed and undone. . . .

My first thought was that this light was going to cast me back into the pit, but to my amazement a wave of pure unconditional love flowed over me. It was the last thing I expected. Instead of judgment I was being washed with pure love. Pure, unadulterated, clean, uninhibited, undeserved, love... Later God showed me that when I'd asked for forgiveness in the ambulance, it was then that he forgave me and washed my spirit clean. I found myself beginning to weep uncontrollably as the love became stronger and stronger... This

love was healing my heart and I began to understand that there is incredible hope for humankind in this love.

I was so close I wondered if I could just step into the light that surrounded God and see him face to face. . . . As I stepped into the light it was as if I'd come inside veils of suspended shimmering lights, like suspended stars or diamonds. . . . Standing in the centre of the light stood a man with dazzling white robes reaching down to his ankles. I could see his bare feet. The garments were not man-made fabrics but were like garments of light. As I lifted my eyes up I could see the chest of a man with his arms outstretched as if to welcome me. I looked towards his face. It was so bright. . . . I couldn't make out the features of his face. . . . I knew that I was standing in the presence of Almighty God—no one but God could look like this.

I've studied about 1000 stories of people who have died, been resuscitated, and say similar things about a world to come, and this Divine Being of Light and Love. What's amazing is that around the globe, people describe the same Being they know to be God. People consistently say "He is the Highlight of Heaven." Of all the beauty, wonder, colors, mountains, valleys, loving reunions with family or friends—Nothing compares to the presence of God.

Osis and Haraldsson, two researchers, studied five hundred Americans and five hundred Indians to determine how much religious or cultural conditioning shaped one's near-death experience. They noted, "If the patient sees a radiant man clad in white who induces in him an inexplicable experience of harmony and peace, he might interpret the apparition in various ways: as an angel, Jesus, or God; or if he is a Hindu, Krishna, Siva, or Deva." Though I have heard researchers state conclusions like this, I have never read of NDErs describing anything like Krishna (who has blue skin), Siva (who has three eyes), or the dissolution of the individual self in the impersonal Brahma (the ultimate Hindu reality). Though people make interpretations that differ, what they do describe is this Man of Light they know is God -- across cultures. The characteristics of the Being of Light they report is amazingly consistent with what the Old Testament prophets and Jesus revealed. In the next few minutes, I'm going to not only help you imagine how loving and personal God is, I want to give a few reasons I've come to this conclusion (can read many more in Imagine Heaven). As you listen, think about this "If God is truly as wonderful as NDErs say, why wouldn't we seek to know and follow whole-heartedly after this God who loves us like no other? Ask yourself—am I whole heartedly seeking to follow God?"

God IS Love and Light – that's the first thing every person experiences and what scripture says. Simran nearly died in a bus crash in Mumbai. She recalls, "A bright light appeared, having a soft man's voice that told me, 'You will leave everything behind—your loved ones, money, even your clothes. You'll come to me empty-handed.' The light also gave me an important message to follow it. . . . How can I put it in words? The feeling is way too beautiful...to believe. But so true, so loving, so peaceful." Osis and Haraldsson note: **"Several basic Hindu ideas of the afterlife were never portrayed in the visions of the Indian patients. The various Vedic "loci" of an afterlife—Hindu Heaven—we're never mentioned. Nor were reincarnation and dissolution in Brahma, the formless aspect of God which is the goal of Indian spiritual striving. The concept of Karma—accumulation of merits and demerits—may have been vaguely suggested by reports of a "white robed man with a book of accounts." Osis and Haraldsson**

But A white-robed man with a book of accounts, who is Light and Love, is not Hindu—it's the description the ancient Jewish Prophets and the disciples of Jesus gave of God. Yahweh appeared as a Brilliant Light to Moses: **The Lord passed in front of Moses, calling out, "Yahweh! The Lord! The God of compassion and mercy! I am slow to anger and filled with unfailing love and faithfulness. I lavish unfailing love to a thousand generations. I forgive iniquity, rebellion, and sin. But I do not excuse the guilty."** Exodus 34:6-7 (~1500 BCE)

The Jewish prophet Ezekiel saw a vision of Heaven: **High above on the throne was a figure like that of a man. I saw that from what appeared to be his waist up he looked like glowing metal, as if full of fire, and that from there down he looked like fire; and brilliant light surrounded him. Like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the radiance around him. This was the**

appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. Ezekiel 1:26-27 (~600 BCE) The Jewish prophets saw this Man of Brilliant Light.

Don Piper, pronounced dead for 90 minutes by EMS when an 18 wheeler ran over the top of his car looked through the Archway, he called a Pearlescent gate into the City of God and with this new vision could see up on a hill in the City this same throne:

[45sec DON – 1:05:08—1:05:52?]

Daniel saw God and the Messiah (son of Man—which became Jesus favorite name for himself) in a vision of Heaven: **As I looked, thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days [God] took his seat. His clothing was as white as snow; the hair of his head was white like wool. His throne was flaming with fire [brilliant light]...The court was seated, and the books were opened...and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. Daniel 7:9-14 (~550 BCE)** Right here, this Jewish prophet who believes there's only One God describes the the mystery of One God, revealed in brilliant Light, coming as a son of Man who people of all nations will worship, and his kingdom will never end. Daniel later sees this Messiah **I looked up and saw a man dressed in linen clothing, with a belt of pure gold around his waist. His body looked like a precious gem. His face flashed like lightning, and his eyes flamed like torches...and his voice roared like a vast multitude of people. Daniel 10:5-6** It's uncanny how many NDErs see this same Man of Light, hear the same voice, yet all these prophets wrote this before Jesus was born. Then Paul and others saw the risen Jesus after the crucifixion: **As [Paul] was approaching Damascus on this mission, a light from heaven suddenly shone down around him. 4 He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?" "Who are you, lord?" Saul asked. And the voice replied, "I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting!" Acts 9:3-5**

Friends, this Being of Light and love, is Jesus—the Highlight of Heaven. Jesus said, **27 My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. 28 I give them eternal life, and they will never perish...No one can snatch them from the Father's hand. The Father and I are one."** John 10:27-30 I've had lots of you share NDEs, one woman told me her 3yr old fell in their pool, drowned, Drs said he wouldn't survive and if he did, he'd have brain damage. 12 hours later, miraculously recovered. The mom writes, "He told me of seeing Jesus—Jesus' smile." I asked "What did he look like?" With a childish chuckle, he said, "like Jesus, Mommy." His total assurance of Jesus was breathtaking." Listen how Dr. Neal, who was dead 30 minutes when her kayak got pinned under a waterfall describes this perfect knowing:

[MARY NEAL :57-2:24, 1:10:40-1:11:37 I knew Him like I know my husband...none deserve His love...not sure that's how he always is"]

God is Personal – God fills the universe, so of course that's not what he always looks like, but what most NDEs say, and what the scripture's proclaim is that God is a person. God appears not as an impersonal force, or some impersonal consciousness—NDErs describe a Personal Being who knows them personally like no other, yet loves them unconditionally. Jesus demonstrated this—he called his disciples his friends. Eben Alexander did not seem to recognize Jesus (though he seemed to make a connection in church after his NDE), but says: "One of the biggest mistakes people make when they think about God is to imagine God as impersonal. Yes, God is behind the numbers, the perfection of the universe. . . . [but God is] even more human than you and I are. [He] understands and sympathizes with our human situation more profoundly and personally than we can even imagine."

Scripture explains what Eben experienced: **"Because God's children are human beings—made of flesh and blood—the Son also became flesh and blood. . . . It was necessary for him to be made in every respect like us, his brothers and sisters, so that he could be our merciful and faithful High Priest before God. Then he could offer a sacrifice that would take away the sins of the people. Since he himself has gone through suffering and testing, he is able to help us when we are being tested. . . .[Jesus] understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same testings we do, yet he did not**

sin. So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most. (Heb. 2:14, 17–18; 4:15–16 NLT)

He is personal—he loves you, he knows you better than you know yourself, and all you have to do is turn to Him—he forgives all who want forgiveness, and he guides all who want His guidance. He is already pleased with you because He created you for himself. All He wants—is you—a loving relationship with you!

[Dale Black was a TWA airline pilot I interviewed last week, a smart man with a PhD who has run several multi-million dollar airline companies—I tell you that because when I asked him about seeing Jesus when his plane crashed, he was undone ...Listen **DALE 3:48:06-49:36; 3:51:07-53:47**]:

“Do you love me?” **God is Relational** – The reason God does not force himself on us, and the reason He doesn’t tell NDers his identity unless they seek to know Him, is that loving relationship cannot be forced—it must be freely chosen. Relationship is what God wants—it’s all He wants—it’s why He created you. The problem with this world is that we all turn from God and seek our will and ways far more than we seek to obey God’s will and ways. Jesus demonstrated God’s unconditional love meeting God’s Justice—poured out on the cross to lead us back into right-relatedness with God. Jesus said: **“This is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him. John 3:16-18** This is exactly what people experience in the presence of this God of Light. Some Christians wonder “Why would those who don’t believe in Jesus see him and feel love and compassion instead of judgment?” Because that’s Who He is—to the woman caught in adultery that the religious leaders wanted to condemn to death, Jesus protected her and said “I don’t condemn you, now go and sin no more.” That’s how great the love and amazing Grace of God is—He will take back anyone who turns to him. Even an atheist who denied him and cursed his name. **HOWARD STORM**

CLOSE: [Two thugs (thieves and murderers) hung on either side of Jesus as He was crucified to pay for all our wrongs. One thug demanded “If you are the Savior—then get us down off the cross” – He demanded of God—prove yourself to me by doing my will. Jesus didn’t respond. The second thug said, “We deserve this—Jesus has done no wrong...Jesus, please remember me when you come in your Kingdom.” That’s all he said, and Jesus said “Today you’ll be with me in Paradise.”]

PRAY WITH ME...