



*Visits to*  
Heaven  
*and* Back

**ARE THEY REAL?**

Mark Hitchcock

bestselling author of *55 Answers to Questions about Life after Death*

Visits to Heaven and Back—Are They Real?



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*Visits to Heaven and Back—Are They Real?*

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*To my grandson, Gavin Gray Hitchcock*

*I can't believe the joy you've already brought to my life  
in such a brief time. I pray for you every day. May the  
Lord grant us many years to enjoy here on earth and the  
blessing of eternity together in our heavenly home.*



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*There are three heavens.*

*The first heaven is where the birds fly;  
the second heaven is where the stars are;  
and the third heaven is the abode of God.*

*The first heaven we see by day;  
the second heaven we see by night;  
and the third heaven we see by faith.*

ADRIAN ROGERS

*I want to know one thing, the way to heaven; how to land safe on  
that happy shore. God Himself has condescended to teach the way;  
for this end He came from heaven. He hath written it down in a  
book. Give me that book! At any price give me the Book of God!*

JOHN WESLEY

CHAPTER I

# HEAVEN CAN'T WAIT

*Dear God,*

*What is it like when a person dies? Nobody will tell me. I just want to know, I don't want to do it.*

*Your friend,*

*Mike*

A CHILD'S LETTER TO GOD

VISITS TO HEAVEN and back are where it's at today. Some of the runaway bestsellers in the last few years are tales of heavenly tourism. Interest in near-death experiences (NDEs) has exploded. The fascination over what happens after death has reached critical mass. Heaven is hot. In just the last decade, dozens of heavenly memoirs have piled into bookstores and online retailers. They fill and even top the bestseller lists. Book sales for this new genre are stratospheric.

The stories of heaven come from people of every age and all walks of life: young children, teenagers, mothers, fathers, grandmothers, pastors, orthopedists, neurosurgeons—the list goes on and on. Most of these stories are born out of terrible

tragedies—horrific car accidents, drowning, electrocution, grave illness, or serious surgery. The stories of life-and-death struggles in these books are captivating by themselves. Each story is unique and filled with page-turning details. They pack a powerful emotional punch. They tug strongly on the heartstrings. But adding the dimension of traveling to heaven and back puts them over the top—literally. The craving for these books is insatiable. The world in general, and Christians in particular, seem to be obsessed with travels to heaven and back.

Why the soaring success? Clearly these books have tapped into the universal human longing to peer behind the veil of death to get a sneak preview of the afterlife. As Douglas Jacoby says, “The afterlife is a subject that interests everyone, because it is about the one thing that happens to us all. Ultimately, nothing could be more relevant.”<sup>1</sup> He’s right. What happens after death is a timeless topic. Dealing with death is not optional. Everyone wants to know what happens after we exhale our last breath.

C. S. Lewis, in “The Weight of Glory,” wrote poignantly of “the inconsolable secret” that resides in each of us. He spoke of how all of us “remain conscious of a desire which no natural happiness will satisfy.” Lewis said that we possess a “longing to be acknowledged, to meet with some response, to bridge some chasm that yawns between us and reality . . . to be reunited with something in the universe from which we now feel cut off, to be on the inside of some door which we have always seen from the outside.” We yearn, he says,

for a “welcome into the heart of things.”<sup>2</sup> What could meet this universal need and be marketed with greater success than heavenly stories that make us feel like we know what life after death holds for us—stories that speak intimately of God, Jesus, angels, and departed loved ones and a glorious destiny that awaits us all?

People everywhere are searching for a preview, a sneak peek behind the curtain to get a jump on the afterlife. The yearning to know just a little more, the urge for any insight, no matter how trivial, is irrepressible. Fresh stories about visits to heaven and back hold out the hope that our longing to know more can be satisfied. For many who have gone through tragedy themselves or who have lost a dear friend or loved one, these books are consulted for comfort, hope, and reassurance about life after death. Grieving hearts grasping for meaning and answers are particularly drawn to these stories. After all, there’s a yearning to believe that our deceased friends or loved ones are happy and satisfied in the hereafter.

### The Third Wave

Stories about visits to heaven and back are a fairly recent phenomenon. The brief history of this sensation can be captured in three waves. The first wave of interest in afterlife experiences hit in the 1970s when reports of NDEs were first publicized. Raymond Moody’s *Life After Life*, published in 1975, investigated the experiences of more than one hundred people who were clinically dead but then resuscitated.

Moody discovered that virtually all of his subjects shared a common, positive, enlightening experience during their near-death condition. Moody's second book, *Reflections on Life After Life* (1977), drew on more NDEs and discovered more common, recurring elements in these experiences. The world was hooked. People have been gripped with back-from-the-dead stories of NDEs ever since. Pandora's box has been opened.

In the 1990s, the second wave rolled in with the accounts of Betty Eadie (*Embraced by the Light*, 1992) and Dannon Brinkley (*Saved by the Light*, 1994). These books hit the *New York Times* Best Sellers List. Both of them contain mystical, New Age, and ultimately unbiblical teachings. (We'll talk about Betty Eadie's book in more detail in chapter 3.) Writing in the mid-1990s about the second wave of heaven-and-back books, Tal Brooke said, "What is different about the second wave is that the public seems ready to accept these reports at face value. And this includes a large cross section of Christians who have broken rank, crossing over into the realm of the occult without even knowing it."<sup>3</sup>

The third wave, perhaps better characterized as a tsunami, hit in 2004 with *90 Minutes in Heaven* by Don Piper. From that time until today, we've witnessed an explosion of firsthand accounts from people who claim to have visited heaven and from a few who claim to have made the round-trip to hell and back. Judging by the sales numbers, the endorsements of well-known pastors, and the positive word-of-mouth these books have generated, the public has

embraced and celebrated these memoirs, accepting one after another with open hearts and minds. Their mushrooming popularity has resulted in hundreds of books on this topic, many of them bestsellers with a few selling millions of copies. *Heaven Is for Real*—the gold standard for heaven-and-back stories—has sold almost ten million copies, and at the time I'm writing these words, it still sits near the top one hundred books on Amazon. Sony Pictures released a movie version of *Heaven Is for Real* in spring 2014, and it earned over \$100 million in the worldwide box office.<sup>4</sup>

I expect these to-heaven-and-back books to continue to roll off the presses because the popularity and staggering sales numbers are hard to ignore. As Craig Wilson says, “Just ask any bookseller in America. Folks have been going to heaven with amazing regularity lately. . . . It's a lucrative journey. Three of these tales have ascended to heavenly heights on USA Today's best-seller list recently, and more are on the way.”<sup>5</sup>

So you can get a feel for just how big this phenomenon is, here's a brief list, in alphabetical order, of forty of the main books in this burgeoning genre:

- Eben Alexander, *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon's Journey into the Afterlife*
- Reggie Anderson, *Appointments with Heaven: The True Story of a Country Doctor's Healing Encounters with the Hereafter*

- P. M. H. Atwater and David H. Morgan, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Near-Death Experiences*
- Mary Baxter, *A Divine Revelation of Heaven*
- Mary Baxter, *A Divine Revelation of Hell*
- Marvin J. Besteman, *My Journey to Heaven: What I Saw and How It Changed My Life*
- Dale Black, *Flight to Heaven: A Plane Crash . . . A Lone Survivor . . . A Journey to Heaven—and Back*
- Dannion Brinkley, *Saved by the Light*
- Ben Brocard, *I Went to Heaven and I Saw God*
- Richard Bullivant, *Heaven and the Afterlife: Is Heaven Real? True Life Stories from Those Who Died and Live to Tell the Tale*
- Todd Burpo, *Heaven Is for Real: A Little Boy's Astounding Story of His Trip to Heaven and Back*
- Patrick Doucette, *Is Heaven for Real?: Personal Stories of Visiting Heaven*
- Jesse Duplantis, *Heaven: Close Encounters of the God Kind*
- James L. Garlow and Keith Wall, *Encountering Heaven and the Afterlife: True Stories from People Who Have Glimpsed the World Beyond*
- Celeste and Matthew Goodwin, *A Boy Back from Heaven*
- Trudy Harris, *Glimpses of Heaven: True Stories of Hope and Peace at the End of Life's Journey* (This book was released in 2008 and was still on the *New York Times* Best Sellers List in August 2014.)

- Trudy Harris, *More Glimpses of Heaven: Inspiring True Stories of Hope and Peace at the End of Life's Journey*
- Lonnie Honeycutt, *Death, Heaven and Back: The True Story of One Man's Death and Resurrection*
- Kat Kerr, Walter Reynolds, and Scribe Angels, *Revealing Heaven: An Eyewitness Account*
- Roberts Liardon, *Life After Death: What I Saw in Heaven*
- Roberts Liardon, *We Saw Heaven: True Stories of What Awaits You on the Other Side*
- Kevin and Alex Malarkey, *The Boy Who Came Back from Heaven: A Remarkable Account of Miracles, Angels, and Life beyond This World*
- Crystal McVea and Alex Tresniowski, *Waking Up in Heaven: A True Story of Brokenness, Heaven, and Life Again*
- Elisa Medhus, *My Son and the Afterlife: Conversations from the Other Side*
- Grady Mosby, *A Near Death Experience: I Died and Came Back from Hell*
- Mary C. Neal, *To Heaven and Back: A Doctor's Extraordinary Account of Her Death, Heaven, Angels, and Life Again: A True Story*
- Don Piper, *90 Minutes in Heaven: A True Story of Death and Life*
- John Pontius, *Visions of Glory: One Man's Astonishing Account of the Last Days*
- John W. Price, *Revealing Heaven: The Eyewitness*



*Accounts That Changed How a Pastor Thinks about the Afterlife*

- Dennis and Nolene Prince, *Nine Days in Heaven: The Vision of Marietta Davis*
- Tessy Rawlins, *Near Death Experiences; True Stories of Those Who Went to Heaven*
- Sid Roth and Lonnie Lane, *Heaven Is beyond Your Wildest Expectations: Ten True Stories of Experiencing Heaven*
- Vassula Ryden, *Heaven Is Real but So Is Hell: An Eyewitness Account of What Is to Come*
- Jenny Sharkey and Ian McCormack, *Clinically Dead: I've Seen Heaven and Hell*
- Richard Sigmund, *My Time in Heaven: A True Story of Dying and Coming Back*
- Howard Storm, *My Descent into Death: A Second Chance at Life*
- David E. Taylor, *My Trip to Heaven: Face to Face with Jesus*
- Heidi Telpner, *One Foot in Heaven: Journey of a Hospice Nurse*
- Freddy Vest, *The Day I Died: My Astonishing Trip to Heaven and Back*
- Bill Wiese, *23 Minutes in Hell: One Man's Story about What He Saw, Heard, and Felt in That Place of Torment*

The list could go on and on and probably will. The addiction to heavenly travelogues shows no signs of abating.

## Fact, Fantasy, or Fraud?

The commercial success of these books is undeniable. Still, there is some cause for concern with these heavenly memoirs. My worry is that people want the message of these books to be true so badly that they are willing to consume these stories and instinctively believe them, often with little or no discernment. The language is sensational, fascinating, and appealing, and people everywhere believe it.<sup>6</sup> But should we? That's the key question I want to address in this book. What are we to make of these stories? Are they fact, fantasy, or fraud?

My interest in answering this question was aroused during a fascinating conversation at 30,000 feet. My wife and I were on a Southwest Airlines flight from our home in Oklahoma City to a speaking engagement in California. I was reading *Heaven Is for Real* on the plane. The movie version of the book was about to debut, and I had watched an interview on one of the network morning shows with the authors, Todd and Colton Burpo. My interest was piqued. I wanted to find out whether the runaway bestseller was as great as some people had told me or whether it was garbage as others had reported—or somewhere in between. I had my suspicions, but the only way to find out for sure was to read the book for myself.

The woman next to me saw that I was reading the book and told me she liked it very much. She was the librarian at a Baptist church in Texas. “How do you like it?” she asked me.

By that time I was about three-fourths of the way through.

I told her that the story of Colton's medical issues and recovery was encouraging but that I didn't put any stock in the account of his trip to heaven and back. Somewhat surprised, she asked me why I felt that way. Not knowing her or how she might respond, I carefully and thoughtfully (I hope) outlined some of the specific statements in the book that I believe contradict Scripture (which I'll look at in detail in chapter 6).

She listened to what I had to say and then said, "You know, I've never considered some of those things." But then she added, "Well, at least the book will do a lot of good by getting people to think about heaven and life after death."

"God can certainly use books like *Heaven Is for Real* for his purposes," I responded, "and it can spur beneficial conversations about heaven and life after death, but heaven-and-back books can also do a great deal of damage by giving people a wrong view of heaven or failing to accurately tell them how to get there." I added, "Or in some cases these books can actually lull readers into the false belief that everyone goes to heaven."

She graciously nodded and seemed to agree with what I had said. She thanked me and said, "You've given me a lot to think about."

As I reflected on our conversation, the idea for this book crystallized. I thought about the millions of people like the woman on the airplane who had never thought about the ramifications of heavenly memoirs that are not scripturally sound. I thought about that woman's comments and how we

all have to be careful not to adopt the pragmatic argument that just because God can bring good out of bad, the bad is acceptable or not really that bad. Of course, God is sovereign, but that's no excuse for promoting error. Professing Christians who write books—even books about very personal experiences—are responsible to make every effort to interpret Scripture accurately and at least not to directly contradict it.

I realize many people today instantly recoil when anyone questions books they view as innocent, and which have purportedly helped bring hope and encouragement to so many people. Some might say, "Aren't these books just harmless speculation? What's the big deal? Why pick on these books that seem to be giving so many people comfort and hope? Who are you to question someone else's experience?" I understand that attitude. The prevailing notion today is that it's unloving and uncharitable to question someone else's experience or private revelation from God. So I realize at the outset that some, maybe even many, will dismiss or even reject any appraisal or critique of these books out of hand. Of course, that's their choice, but we are all subject to God's Word. I have nothing personal against any of the people who have written about trips to heaven and back. I'm sure most of them are very nice, sincere people. But with the astonishing popularity of these books, I'm sure there will be many more to come. Thus, it's incumbent on believers to discern the truth of the claims being made and to think biblically about heaven and the afterlife.

One overriding message in most of these books is that there is nothing to fear in the afterlife. They are full of unconditional love no matter who you are, what you've done, or what you haven't done. That's part of the attraction of these books in our modern culture, where tolerance and acceptance are worshiped. The message of these books meshes with how people want heaven to be. But we have to ask—is that how heaven is presented in God's Word? In the pages that follow, I want to answer that question and many more:

- What are we to make of this publishing phenomenon?
- Can we dismiss these books as harmless speculation?
- Are NDEs real?
- Are people really going to heaven (and in some cases hell) and coming back?
- Have these people met Jesus and talked with him?
- Are their descriptions reliable?
- What does the Bible say?

### Heavenly Minded

Thinking about heaven, hell, and life after death, while not always practiced today, is very important to daily life. I'm all for being heavenly minded and maintaining an eternal perspective, as Scripture teaches (see Colossians 3:1-4). But as with any other area of biblical truth or theology, we have to make sure that our thinking about heaven is in line with God's Word and not the product of imagination, fantasy,

or delusion. As Douglas Jacoby says, “The public appetite for the transcendent is enormous, but people need truth, not speculation.”<sup>7</sup> I agree. There’s far too much speculation and sensationalism out there today, especially concerning life after death. In this book I hope to balance this speculation and sensationalism with our only reliable source about the afterlife—Scripture. God’s Word is *the* travel brochure that tells us what heaven is like and *the* road map—the navigational system—to direct us how to get there.

But before we launch into our assessment of heavenly memoirs, let’s make a brief stop at the beginning point for the modern obsession with life after death—events commonly known as near-death experiences. Let’s consider whether they really happen and whether they can tell us anything about eternity.