

STUDY GUIDE

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JOHN BURKE

IMAGINE
THE
GOD
OF
HEAVEN

FIVE SESSIONS ON
NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES,
GOD'S REVELATION, AND THE LOVE
YOU'VE ALWAYS WANTED

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Imagine the God of Heaven Study Guide: Five Sessions on Near-Death Experiences, God's Revelation, and the Love You've Always Wanted

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29 28 27 26 25 24 23
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

From John Burke *v*
Study Guide Overview *vii*

SESSION 1: IMAGINE THE GOD OF HEAVEN 1

Read chapters 1–3 for next week
Week 1 personal studies (5 days)

SESSION 2: THE GOD OF ALL NATIONS 27

Read chapters 4–7 for next week
Week 2 personal studies (5 days)

SESSION 3: THE GOD OF COMPASSION 55

Read chapters 8–11 for next week
Week 3 personal studies (5 days)

SESSION 4: THE GOD WHO IS ONE YET THREE 83

Read chapters 12–14 for next week
Week 4 personal studies (5 days)

SESSION 5: THE GOD WHO DOES LIFE WITH YOU 113

Reading completed by week 5
No personal studies

Facilitator's Guide 119
FAQs on NDEs 123
Notes 131
About the Author 133

Study Guide Overview

WELCOME

You are about to begin an exciting journey through the *Imagine the God of Heaven* small group Bible study. During the next five weeks, we will enjoy an in-depth exploration of God's wonders and how we relate to God. Nothing is more important than the way we imagine God because the way we view God affects every decision we make about how we live today.

THE BOOK AND VIDEO

This study guide and video curriculum are based on the book, *Imagine the God of Heaven: Near-Death Experiences, God's Revelation, and the Love You've Always Wanted*. After the first session, you'll see that the theme of each session aligns with one of the four parts of the book. Although we will not cover all the material in the book chapter by chapter, we will explore the four themes in a practical and deeper way.

Each of the five group sessions includes a fifteen-minute video featuring comments from John Burke and testimonies from some of the people you'll read about in the book.

GROUP STUDY FORMAT

The *Imagine the God of Heaven* video series and study guide are designed to be experienced in a group setting (such as a small group gathering or

Sunday school class) but can also be adapted for individual study. Each group session begins with questions for reflection and Scripture passages. The remainder of the session includes video teaching, a directed discussion on the video teaching and testimonies, and a closing prayer. Feel free to adapt the format to the size and structure of your group or for individual use.

Everyone in the group should have their own copy of this study guide as well as the *Imagine the God of Heaven* book. Why? Because it helps all members to actively engage in group discussions, to complete the five personal studies, and to benefit from the content in the book. Also, keep in mind that the video and discussion questions are simply tools to help you engage with the session. The real transformation comes from digging into Scripture and engaging with the God of Scripture as you're learning.

In meetings, group members are encouraged to share how they are learning and engaging with God during the week. This might include talking about failures or struggles as well as wins and new learnings, because both are necessary for any authentic relationship to grow. Groups should have a facilitator to help create a safe environment in which questions, doubts, concerns, struggles, and victories are all welcome. The facilitator is responsible for leading the meeting, starting the video, and keeping track of time during discussions. Facilitators may also prompt participants to contribute to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to participate. For additional guidance, see the Facilitator's Guide (page 119).

INDIVIDUAL STUDY

Every group session is followed by five personal studies designed to lead you into a deeper engagement with the theme of that session. Each personal study includes Scripture reading, reflection questions, and a suggested focus for prayer to deepen your communication with God. If your group meets every other week rather than weekly, you can adapt the personal studies simply by spacing them out to every other day.

IMAGINE THE GOD OF HEAVEN

OPEN

A pastor named A. W. Tozer once wrote, “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”¹ One of the amazing things about God is that he wants to be known. He has revealed himself throughout the Bible, in the life of Jesus, and in all kinds of other ways. In this study, we will consider how God’s revelation in Scripture aligns with what we learn about God from those who have had near-death experiences (NDEs). Whether you’re just exploring faith in God or have followed God for years, the goal of our time together will be to know God more so we can love him more.

Questions

1. Which of the following images comes closest to describing how you imagined God when you were a child?
 - Policeman God. *God is an eye in the sky, always trying to catch you doing something wrong.*
 - Grandpa God. *God is retired from doing his work, kind of senile, and basically out of commission.*
 - Hidden God. *God is uninvolved, distant, and unknowable.*
 - Marine Sergeant God. *God is a stern, impossible-to-please taskmaster.*
 - Mr. Rogers God. *God is a slipper-wearing sweetheart, always ready with a smile and an encouraging word.*
 - Loving Parent God. *God is a tender, kind, sometimes correcting, always caring parent in heaven.*

IMAGINE THE GOD OF HEAVEN STUDY GUIDE

2. Now that you are older, what image comes to mind when you think about God? How is it similar to or different from your childhood image of God?

3. If what A. W. Tozer wrote is true—that what we think about God is the most important thing about us—what implications might that have for you? In other words, how might the way you imagine God now impact how you see yourself? Treat other people? Understand the world at large?

READ

The Word [Jesus] gave life to everything that was created,
and his life brought light to everyone.

The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness can never extinguish it.

God sent a man, John the Baptist, to tell about the light so that everyone might believe because of his testimony. John himself was not the light; he was simply a witness to tell about the light. The one who is the true light, who gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.

JOHN 1:4-9

IMAGINE THE GOD OF HEAVEN STUDY GUIDE

2. Why do you think Jesus is called “the true light”?

3. Why is it important that Jesus came into the world to give light “to everyone”?

WATCH

Watch the Session 1 video and take notes on your reflections and questions.

*“How could I explain so many people, clinically dead,
with no heartbeat, no brain waves, yet when resuscitated,
they come back saying similar things?”*

“Paul said, ‘I was caught up to the third heaven’ (2 Corinthians 12:2).”

IMAGINE THE GOD OF HEAVEN

“Why do you think we are hearing more of these near-death experiences today?”

DISCUSS

1. What thoughts, feelings, or questions did watching the video bring up for you?
2. John Burke admits that he initially struggled to believe in NDEs. What, if anything, makes it difficult for you to believe in NDEs?
3. NDE testimonies do not equate with God’s revelation of himself in Scripture. However, they do add color to the picture God has already given of himself in the Bible. In what ways, if any, do NDE testimonies enhance your image of God?

4. When Christians talk about God, they often mention that God is all loving, all knowing, and all powerful, but not that he is light. Yet, it is the light of God that NDErs so often comment on. What do you think this means, and why does it matter that God is light?

5. If NDEs are God's gift to the world, how might these experiences fit with the idea that Jesus came to bring the light of God into the world so everyone can know him?

CLOSE

Encouragement

We have a God of light in whom there is no darkness. God wants to cleanse us from our sin, give us fellowship with one another, and ultimately make his eternal home with us. That is a God worth knowing and who is impossible not to love!

Prayer

*Invite God to give you a passion to seek him,
to know him, and to share him with others.*



This coming week: Read chapters 1–3 of *Imagine the God of Heaven* and complete the personal studies.

FROM SKEPTICAL TO CONVINCED

In *Imagine the God of Heaven*, John Burke writes that he was initially skeptical about near-death experiences (NDEs) but became convinced through his research, in which he discovered that millions of people have reported having NDEs and that their stories have incredible commonalities. Not only that, but many doctors have become convinced because of patients who described what they experienced while clinically dead, including details that would otherwise have been impossible for them to know.

READ

One of the twelve disciples, Thomas (nicknamed the Twin), was not with the others when Jesus came. They told him, “We have seen the Lord!”

But he replied, “I won’t believe it unless I see the nail wounds in his hands, put my fingers into them, and place my hand into the wound in his side.”

Eight days later the disciples were together again, and this time Thomas was with them. The doors were locked; but suddenly, as before, Jesus was standing among them. “Peace be with you,” he said. Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here, and look at my hands. Put your hand into the wound in my side. Don’t be faithless any longer. Believe!”

“My Lord and my God!” Thomas exclaimed.

Then Jesus told him, “You believe because you have seen me. Blessed are those who believe without seeing me.”

JOHN 20:24-29

REFLECT

1. How would you describe your view of NDEs? Are you skeptical, convinced, or uncertain? If skeptical or uncertain, what questions do you have? If convinced, what was it that convinced you?

2. John Burke writes, “Over the past thirty-five years, I’ve interviewed countless individuals and studied thousands of NDE reports. . . . I’ve since become convinced that NDEs are God’s gift to our world—evidence of God’s great love for all people” (*Imagine the God of Heaven*, page 24). If it’s true that NDEs are a gift from God to reveal his love, in what ways have the NDE stories you’ve read and watched helped you to experience or understand some new insight about God’s love?

3. In the passage from the Gospel of John, Thomas, who had on multiple occasions heard Jesus predict his death and resurrection, refused to believe the other disciples’ testimonies that Jesus had in fact risen from the dead. When Jesus later appeared to Thomas, Jesus could have reprimanded Thomas for his doubts, but he didn’t. Instead, he gave Thomas exactly what he needed to believe.

IMAGINE THE GOD OF HEAVEN

- *What role, if any, has doubt played in your own spiritual journey?*

- *How has Jesus shown himself to you and given you what you needed to move from doubt to faith? Or how do you wish he would reveal himself to you to help you with your doubts?*

If, like Thomas, you still have doubts about Jesus, know that he welcomes your questions and invites you to seek the truth about who he is. Though he does not make it a practice to just “show himself” as we often think he should, he does respond to our desire to seek him and know him better in ways that are personal to each of us.

- *Start by praying, “God, if you’re real, let me know it. Show yourself to me.”*
- *Consider the evidence for Jesus and his resurrection. There are many great books that address questions about the Christian faith in a systematic way, often referred to as apologetics. Or you can search online for answers by googling “apologetics websites” or checking out GotQuestions.org. Later in *Imagine the God of Heaven*, you’ll read some of the evidence for Jesus, specifically the Old Testament prophecies he fulfilled.*
- *Ask a knowledgeable Christian friend or pastor to meet with you so you can ask questions.*

4. God has always built people's faith through the stories or testimonies of others. And those stories have power. In fact, in recounting his vision of a great heavenly battle in which Satan was defeated, the apostle John heard a loud voice in heaven declare, "And they have defeated him by the blood of the Lamb *and by their testimony*" (Revelation 12:11, emphasis added). Some of the most powerful testimonies in the Bible, such as those from Isaiah, Ezekiel, Paul, and John, offer us a glimpse of heaven.*

- *How would you describe the power or impact of NDE testimonies, especially those that describe heaven?*

- *How have NDE testimonies encouraged your faith or challenged your lack of faith?*

RESPOND

Take a moment to reflect on the ways God has revealed himself to you, recently or in the past. What are you especially grateful for? Thank him for demonstrating his love for you in these ways and invite him to continue building your faith or meeting you in your doubts in the weeks ahead.

* See Isaiah 65:17-25; Ezekiel 43:1-12; 2 Corinthians 5:1-10; 12:1-4; Revelation 21:1-5.

DAY 2

FOUND BY YOU

“Many NDErs come back and seek to learn more about the God of Light, but others do not. God gives us the choice to seek him or ignore him. It’s also important to note that just because an NDEr sees God does not mean that person knows God or is necessarily right with God.”

Imagine the God of Heaven, page 15

READ

“If you look for me wholeheartedly, you will find me. I will be found by you,” says the LORD.

JEREMIAH 29:13-14

Keep on asking, and you will receive what you ask for. Keep on seeking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives. Everyone who seeks, finds. And to everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.

MATTHEW 7:7-8

REFLECT

1. Why do you think some people (NDErs or not) seek God and others don't?

IMAGINE THE GOD OF HEAVEN STUDY GUIDE

2. God promises, “If you look for me wholeheartedly, you will find me.” The two Hebrew words translated “wholeheartedly” are *kol* and *lebab*. *Kol* means “all, everything, totality.” *Lebab* means “heart.” In the Jewish understanding, *heart* can refer to the entire inner person, the “self, the seat of thought and emotion.”² With this understanding in mind, how would you characterize your wholeheartedness—the degree to which you are seeking and following God in this season of your life? Circle the number on the continuum that best describes your response.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

I am not at all
wholehearted.

I am completely
wholehearted.

- *Briefly describe why you responded as you did.*

- *What, if anything, is holding you back from a wholehearted pursuit of God? Why?*

3. Jesus confirmed the promise that God wants to be found by assuring us that, “Everyone who seeks, finds.”

- *What does it tell you about God that he stays “hidden” to those who don’t seek him, yet he makes himself knowable to those who truly want to know him?*

IMAGINE THE GOD OF HEAVEN

- In Matthew 7:7, Jesus used the phrase “keep on” three times: “keep on asking,” “keep on seeking,” “keep on knocking.” To keep on is to continue, to never stop. How might God be inviting you to keep on asking, seeking, and knocking for whatever it is you need most from him right now?
4. What person has God put in your life who you think is open to seeking him? How could you be a help to them? What if you asked them to join you in reading *Imagine the God of Heaven*?

RESPOND

God promises, “If you look for me wholeheartedly, you will find me.” In what personal struggle, relationship, or circumstance do you most need to find God and experience God right now? Share your heart with God and ask him to help you seek him wholeheartedly, holding nothing back.

DAY 3

ALL PEOPLE OF ALL NATIONS

“I am convinced God created all people in his image, and he is *for* all people of all nations. NDErs confirm God speaks to them in their native languages. This God sees all, knows all, wants to forgive all, and unconditionally loves each person uniquely. If you will keep an open mind and follow me on this journey of imagining God, I hope you’ll see that a loving relationship, not religion, is actually what God wants with you and me.” *Imagine the God of Heaven*, page 20

READ

The LORD had said to Abram, “Leave your native country, your relatives, and your father’s family, and go to the land that I will show you. I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you and make you famous, and you will be a blessing to others. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who treat you with contempt. All the families on earth will be blessed through you.”

GENESIS 12:1-3

Many nations will join themselves to the LORD on that day, and they, too, will be my people.

ZECHARIAH 2:11

After this I saw a vast crowd, too great to count, from every nation and tribe and people and language, standing in front of the throne and before the Lamb. They were clothed in white robes and held palm branches in their hands. And they were shouting with a great roar,

“Salvation comes from our God who sits on the throne
and from the Lamb!”

REVELATION 7:9-10

REFLECT

1. God chose Abram (later called Abraham) not just to be blessed but to be a blessing—a blessing to “all the families on earth.” What does that tell you about God?

2. Though the Old Testament is mostly about the Israelites (the descendants of Abraham), we repeatedly see God’s heart for everyone, as affirmed in Zechariah 2:11 above. Why do you think it might have been important for God to remind the Israelites that he was for everyone, not just them?

3. Just as God chose Abraham for an important mission, God has also chosen you and given you a similar mission—to be a blessing to others by serving and loving them and by helping them to know God and his love. To fulfill his mission and receive God’s promise, Abraham first had to leave behind everything that was certain and familiar to him, including the blessings he already had—his country, his relatives, his father’s family.
 - *How would you describe the spiritual truth or principle behind what God required of Abraham, that he first had to leave everything behind?*

IMAGINE THE GOD OF HEAVEN STUDY GUIDE

- *What implications might that same spiritual truth or principle have for you? In other words, what certain and familiar things might God ask you to leave behind or let go of so you can be a blessing to others?*

4. God's heart is for all people and all nations.

- *What do you think are some signs that a person's heart is aligned with God's heart? For example, how might that be evident in the way a person prays, spends money, allocates their time, or chooses their friends?*

- *How would you assess yourself in these same areas? In what ways is your heart most or least aligned with God's heart for all people and all nations?*

5. In Revelation 7, we see that heaven will be filled with people "from every nation and tribe."

- *What about that makes you excited? What, if anything, makes you nervous or uncomfortable?*

IMAGINE THE GOD OF HEAVEN

- *If God's Kingdom sons and daughters will come from every tribe and nation, how might we align ourselves and prepare ourselves for that kind of eternity even now?*

Over the next few weeks, consider taking one of the following steps to grow your heart for people outside of your culture or nation:

- *Pick a country to pray for every day.*
- *Go out of your way to meet and get to know someone of a different race, culture, or nationality.*
- *Ask someone who has a very different ethnic and cultural background from you to go to lunch or come over for dinner.*
- *Look into opportunities to go on a cross-cultural serving trip.*
- *Read a biography of (or study online about) a cross-cultural Christ-follower such as Hudson Taylor, William Carey, Elisabeth Elliot, or Adoniram Judson.*

RESPOND

God's heart is that people from all nations will come to faith. Ask God to help you align your heart with his heart in every area of your life. Invite him to show you how you can be a blessing to others this week.

FOR A PURPOSE

“About the time human history began to be widely recorded, God claimed to do something to bless all people. Around 2000 BCE, God chose two people through whom he would create a ‘chosen nation.’ The word *chosen*, though, is sometimes misunderstood. *Chosen* does not mean ‘loved more’ or ‘better than’ but rather ‘set apart for a purpose.’ . . .

“When God created the ‘chosen’ Jewish nation, he did so to bless all people in two ways. First, he revealed his heart, his character, and his will through many Jewish prophets so that we can know and love him as he loves us. Second, he made the incredible and radical prophetic promise that he would send the Messiah, the Savior for all humanity, to bless all nations for all time. As you will see throughout this book, NDErs around the globe meet this same ‘I AM’ that Jesus claimed to reveal (John 8:58).” *Imagine the God of Heaven*, pages 46–47

READ

He said to me, “You are my servant, Israel,
and you will bring me glory.”

I replied, “But my work seems so useless!

I have spent my strength for nothing and to no purpose.” . . .

And now the LORD speaks—

the one who formed me in my mother’s womb to be his servant,
who commissioned me to bring Israel back to him. . . .

He says, “You will do more than restore the people of Israel to me.

I will make you a light to the Gentiles,

and you will bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.”

ISAIAH 49:3-6

Starting with Abraham, the nation of Israel was chosen by God. They were chosen to be a light to all the nations, a conduit of God’s message

and love. But over time, they took being chosen as being better than other nations and saw themselves as the sole recipient and keeper of God's message and love. Isaiah expresses his dismay that Israel had failed to fulfill its purpose when he declares that his work is "useless," "for nothing and to no purpose." In response, God speaks of another Servant, who would accomplish what his servant Israel could not. This new Servant would not only restore the people of Israel but be "a light to the Gentiles" to bring salvation to the ends of the earth. This is a reference to the Messiah, whom Isaiah says will be killed to pay for our sins and bring salvation to all the nations (see Isaiah 52:13–53:12). Jesus is that Messiah, and when he came to earth, he declared God's love for *all* nations and scolded the Israelites for their ethnocentric, nationalistic, selfish chokehold on God and his blessings.

When Jesus heard this [the faith of a Roman officer], he was amazed. Turning to those who were following him, he said, "I tell you the truth, I haven't seen faith like this in all Israel! And I tell you this, that many Gentiles will come from all over the world—from east and west—and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob at the feast in the Kingdom of Heaven. But many Israelites—those for whom the Kingdom was prepared—will be thrown into outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

MATTHEW 8:10-12

What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you shut the door of the Kingdom of Heaven in people's faces. You won't go in yourselves, and you don't let others enter either.

MATTHEW 23:13

"Yes," said Jesus, "what sorrow also awaits you experts in religious law! For you crush people with unbearable religious demands, and you never lift a finger to ease the burden."

LUKE 11:46

IMAGINE THE GOD OF HEAVEN

- *Many Israelites chose to separate themselves from nonbelievers, ignoring God's command to share his love and mercy with them. In what ways have you seen Christians do the same?*

- *Instead of being for non-Israelites, the Israelites developed an "us vs. them" mentality. In what ways have you witnessed this same mentality among Christians today?*

4. Now, let's make this personal.

- *When have you found yourself thinking you are better than nonbelievers or that God isn't for them in the ways he is for you?*

- *In what ways, if any, have you separated yourself from nonbelievers?*

IMAGINE THE GOD OF HEAVEN STUDY GUIDE

- *When are you most likely to adopt an “us vs. them” mentality toward nonbelievers?*

5. What would have to shift in you for your heart to align with God’s heart—to be truly *for* all people?

RESPOND

God wants you to have his heart for everyone so you will share his love, mercy, and kindness with everyone. Thank him for being patient with you and ask him to transform your heart so it becomes more and more like his.

INFINITE AND INTIMATE

Bibi Tahereh's story is featured in chapter 3 of *Imagine the God of Heaven*. A Muslim at the time, she suffered a heart attack and had an NDE in which she encountered a God who loved her and called himself "I AM." Bibi spent the next year seeking God and asking him to reveal himself to her. He did, and Bibi left Islam to follow Jesus.

READ

In Exodus 3, Moses is captivated by a burning bush and approaches it.

When the LORD saw Moses coming to take a closer look, God called to him from the middle of the bush, "Moses! Moses!"

"Here I am!" Moses replied.

"Do not come any closer," the LORD warned. "Take off your sandals, for you are standing on holy ground. I am the God of your father—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." When Moses heard this, he covered his face because he was afraid to look at God.

EXODUS 3:4-6

When God gives Moses an assignment to go and speak for him, Moses asks who he should say sent him.

God replied to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. Say this to the people of Israel: I AM has sent me to you." God also said to Moses, "Say this to the people of Israel: Yahweh, the God of your ancestors—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob—has sent me to you.

This is my eternal name,
my name to remember for all generations.”

EXODUS 3:14-15

The name “I AM” speaks to God’s *infinite* existence—that he is uncreated and eternally existent. He reveals that he is “other than” or “holy.” God is also *intimate*. He warned Moses not to come closer and to take off his sandals as this was holy ground. Yet, later, we see God repeatedly invited Moses to come closer and to experience intimacy with God, such as when the text says, “The LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend” (Exodus 33:11).

REFLECT

1. Briefly review the three passages from Exodus and write down what they reveal about who God is and how he engages Moses in relationship.

2. God is the great I AM. He is eternal, existing perpetually in the past, present, and future. In *Imagine the God of Heaven*, NDErs consistently say they met a God who is not bound by time. What implications might God being infinite have for the following?
 - *His love*

IMAGINE THE GOD OF HEAVEN

- *His forgiveness*
- *Your prayers*
- *His patience with you*
- *His timing in answering your prayers or acting in your life*

3. John Burke writes, “God is . . . *infinite*. He created time and space, so he exists outside the limits of our three-dimensional space. This means we can’t physically go and ‘find’ God. For us to know God, he must intersect our time and space. In the Bible, God claims he has done this to bless and love all people” (*Imagine the God of Heaven*, page 47).

IMAGINE THE GOD OF HEAVEN STUDY GUIDE

Because he exists outside time and space, God must choose to show up in our lives and, because he loves us, he does.

- *When did God first show up in your life? When and how did you recognize it was God engaging you?*

- *When has God recently intersected time and space to reveal himself to you, to speak to you by prompting your thoughts, or to help you to experience his presence? How did you recognize that it was God engaging you?*

4. God is infinite, and he is also intimate. God met with Moses face-to-face, as a friend. How would you characterize your experience of spending time with God? Do you feel like you're meeting face-to-face with a friend? Why or why not?

RESPOND

Take some time to be face-to-face with God. Praise him for being both infinite and intimate. Thank him for all the ways, large and small, that he has shown up in your life. Tell him how much it means to you that he wants to have an intimate relationship with you.