
LIFE AFTER DEATH - 1

A Christian View of Death, Part IV-A

Near Death Experiences

In recent years near-death experiences, also called out-of-the-body experiences, have received considerable attention. A person may have this experience when he is close to death, but is then resuscitated and brought back to life. During this brush with death, the person supposedly enters the realm of the dead and sees what lies beyond the grave.

Dr. Raymond A. Moody is a prominent figure in the study of near-death experiences. He has analyzed hundreds of cases of near-death experiences and notes striking similarities. In his book *Life After Life*, he constructs what he considers to be the typical near-death experience:

A man is dying and, as he reaches the point of distress, he hears himself pronounced dead by his doctor. He begins to hear an uncomfortable noise, a loud ringing or buzzing, and at the same time feels himself moving very rapidly through a long tunnel. After this, he suddenly finds himself outside his own physical body, but still in the immediate physical environment, and he sees his own body from a distance, as though he is a spectator. He watches the resuscitation attempt from this unusual vantage point and is in a state of emotional upheaval.

After a while, he collects himself and becomes more accustomed to his odd condition. He notices that he still has a “body,” but one of a very different nature and with very different powers from the physical body he has left behind. Soon other things begin to happen. Others come to meet and to help him. He glimpses the spirits of relatives and friends who have already died, and a loving, warm spirit of a kind he has never encountered before—a being of light—appears to him. This being asks him a question, nonverbally, to make him evaluate his life and helps him along by showing him a panoramic, instantaneous playback of the major events of his life. At some point he finds himself approaching some sort of barrier or border, apparently representing the limit between earthly life and the next life. Yet, he finds that he must go back to earth, that the time for his death has not yet come. At this point he resists, for by now he is taken up with his experience in the afterlife and does not want to return. He is overwhelmed by intense feelings of joy, love and peace. Despite his attitude, though, he somehow reunites with his physical body and lives.

Later he tries to tell others, but he has trouble doing so. In the first place, he can find no human words adequate to describe these unearthly episodes. He also finds that others scoff, so he stops telling other people. Still, the experience affects his life profoundly, especially his views about death and its relationship to life.

READ the following passages. Compare these “experiences” with the typical near-death experience described above.
2 Corinthians 12:1-4

Acts 7:55,56

Revelation 7:9-17

Illusion or Reality?

The question arises, “Did the people with near-death experiences really experience what lies beyond the grave, or were they simply hallucinating?” To answer this question we have to look at the cause of the phenomenon. According to experts, some experiences can be attributed to physical causes, such as a lack of oxygen to the brain, the effects of drugs and medications, etc. Such experiences would have to be classified as hallucinations. Studies have shown that certain drugs produce hallucinations similar to those found in near-death experiences.

While most cases would probably fall into this category, one writer suggests, “There are experiences we might call paranormal, that apparently defy the normal medical explanations often put forth.”¹ Some would even attribute them to the devil.

While Dr. Moody would also classify some near-death experiences as supernatural, he rejects the idea that they could have a demonic origin. He argues,

¹ J. Kerby Anderson, *Life, Death and Beyond*, p. 73.

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As a response to such explanations, I can only say this. It seems to me that the best way of distinguishing between God-directed and Satan-directed experiences would be to see what the person involved does and says after his experience. God, I suppose, would try to get those to whom he appears to be loving and forgiving. Satan would presumably tell his servants to follow a course of hate or destruction. Manifestly, my subjects have come back with a renewed commitment to follow the former and to disown the latter.²

READ 2 Corinthians 11:14.

Apply this passage to Moody's argument.

Evaluate the statement: *It is impossible for someone to see heaven in a near-death experience.*

READ Isaiah 8:19,20.

What should we use to judge the validity of near-death experiences?

READ Matthew 12:39.

Note the warning Jesus gave the Pharisees. How does it apply to this situation?

READ Luke 16:29-31.

Some people use near-death experiences to prove there is a life after death. On what should we base our hope for eternal life?

The Final Judgment

Many errors surround the second coming of Jesus and the final judgment. Some believe God will "rapture" the believers first, prior to the final judgment. Others believe in millennialism. Employing a misinterpretation of Revelation 20, millennialists say that when Christ returns, he will rule with his believers for a thousand years in a kingdom here on earth. Let's look to God's Word for a correct view of this matter.

READ Ecclesiastes 12:7.

What happens to a person at death?

READ Luke 23:43; Matthew 22:32.

Some believe that when a person dies, his soul sleeps until Judgment Day. Is this what the Bible teaches? Explain.

READ John 5:28,29.

What will happen to all people on Judgment Day?

Jesus refers to "those who have done good" and "those who have done evil." Is he teaching work-righteousness in these verses? Explain.

READ Matthew 25:34-40.

If we are saved through faith in Christ, why does Jesus commend the good works of the believers in this parable?

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. Evaluate: On Judgment Day, everything we have done will be revealed, both the good and the bad.
2. Evaluate: The Bible teaches that we will have to give account of our sins on the Last Day.

² Raymond A. Moody, *Life After Life* (New York: Mockingbird Books, 1975), p. 156.

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LIFE AFTER DEATH - 2

A Christian View of Death, Part IV-B

Hell—The Fate of the Unbeliever

The majority of near-death experiences describe visions of a better life beyond the grave. Few relate visions of hell. Some researchers maintain that many have unpleasant experiences in their near-death encounters but are reluctant to report them. In such situations human nature tends to remember the good and suppress the bad.

The same applies to a belief in hell. Most believe in some form of heaven. Few believe that hell really exists.

READ Matthew 25:41.

Why was hell created?

READ 2 Peter 3:9; 1 John 4:16.

Some people argue that God is a loving God who wants all people to be saved. Therefore they feel he would never condemn people to hell. How would you answer such an argument? (Cf. Ezekiel 18:23.)

READ John 17:17.

How do we know hell really exists?

The Word *Hell* in the Old Testament

The Old Testament Hebrew word for hell is *sheol*. However, this word is not used exclusively to refer to the place where the unbeliever goes when he dies. It sometimes has a more general meaning and simply refers to the abode of the dead, the place where believers and unbelievers alike go when they die. Thus, it is sometimes translated “the grave.”

READ the following passages. How does the context determine the meaning of the word *sheol* in each case?

- **Genesis 37:35**
- **Jonah 2:2**

Some people maintain hell is a New Testament concept which is not taught in the Old Testament. What do these Old Testament passages say to this point?

- **Isaiah 66:24**
- **Psalms 1:4-6**
- **Daniel 12:2**

What Is Hell Like?

It would be more pleasant if we could concentrate on heaven and not speak about hell. Yet hell is a reality. And the Bible describes it vividly. Even our loving Savior spoke plainly about the suffering of hell.

READ Luke 16:23.

Some teach that the unbeliever will be annihilated in hell. Is hell a “ceasing to exist”? Explain.

Why do we need to explain carefully phrases like “eternal death,” “destroy,” and “perish” when we talk about the fate of the unbeliever?

READ the following passages. What type of pain will the unbeliever suffer in hell?

- **Luke 16:24**
- **Revelation 14:9-11**

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

Jesus speaks about the “gnashing of teeth” that will take place in hell. With this phrase Jesus seems to indicate something about the attitude of the condemned and the general atmosphere of hell. **READ** the following passages and note what this gesture expresses elsewhere in Scripture.

- **Job 16:9**
- **Psalm 35:16**
- **Psalm 37:12**
- **Lamentations 2:16**
- **Acts 7:54**
- **2 Thessalonians 1:9**

READ Matthew 27:46.

What did Jesus suffer on the cross? Why?

READ Matthew 25:46.

What makes the punishment of hell so terrible?

READ Luke 12:47,48; Matthew 11:20-24.

Is it true there are degrees of punishment in hell? Explain.

READ Colossians 2:15.

What comfort does this passage give us?

Heaven—The Hope of the Believer

There are many questions about heaven we can't answer. The Lord doesn't spell out in detail what heaven is like. It's easy to understand why he doesn't. For how could one describe in human terms something as beautiful as eternal life? How could one explain heavenly things, using only earthly words?

But while the Lord doesn't give us a full-length feature film on heaven, he does show us some snapshots of our eternal glory. Let's page through this picture album God gives in his Word.

READ John 6:47.

When does the believer's eternal life begin?

READ 1 Corinthians 15:42-44,51-53.

What type of body will we have in heaven?

READ Philippians 3:20,21; 1 John 3:2.

In what ways will our bodies be like Christ's glorious body?

READ Revelation 21:4.

What will be totally lacking in heaven?

READ Revelation 7:9-17 and note the beautiful “snapshot” of heaven God gives in this section.

READ 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.

What comfort can we have at the death of a fellow Christian?

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

Evaluate the following statements:

1. In heaven we will be like angels.
2. We will recognize each other in heaven.
3. We will be sad if we get to heaven and find that one of our loved ones is missing.
4. Those who have died know what is happening here on earth.
5. We can be sure eternal life is ours.