

Are Visits to Heaven for Real?

By John MacArthur

¹ “Are Visits to Heaven For Real?”

A pastor's book recounting his son's visit to heaven rose to the top of the bestseller list and became a major motion picture. Christians were quick to spread the word, but could such visits be for real?

In recent years, Christian booksellers have inundated the evangelical world with testimonies from people who say they visited heaven in near-death experiences. Their stories are full of specific details about what heaven is like, who is there, and what is happening in the celestial realm. But when we compare their claims with Scripture, it becomes clear that they are merely figments of the human imagination, not true visions of heaven as it is described in God's Word.

The best known of all these tales, *Heaven Is for Real*, is to be a major motion picture, released in April, 2014. It is the story of Colton Burpo, whose parents believe he visited heaven when he was just four – during surgery after a burst appendix nearly took his life. Colton's description of heaven are full of fanciful features and peculiar details that bear all the earmarks of a child's vivid imagination. There's nothing transcendent or even particularly enlightening about Colton's heaven. It is completely devoid of the breathtaking glory featured in every biblical description of the heavenly realm.

Stories like Colton's are as dangerous as they are seductive. Readers not only get a twisted, unbiblical picture of heaven; they also imbibe a subjective, superstitious, shallow brand of spirituality. Studying mystical accounts of supposed journeys into the afterlife yields nothing but confusion, contradiction, false

hope, bad doctrine, and a host of similar evils.

We live in a narcissistic culture, and it shows in these accounts of people who claim they've been to heaven. They sound as if they viewed paradise in a mirror, keeping themselves in the foreground. They say comparatively little about God or His glory. But the glory of God is what the Bible says fills, illuminates, and defines heaven. Instead, the authors of these stories seem obsessed with details like how good they felt – how peaceful, how happy, how comforted they were; how they received privileges and accolades; how fun and enlightening their experience was; and how many things they think they now understand perfectly that could never be gleaned from Scripture alone. In short, they glorify self while barely noticing God's glory. They highlight everything but what's truly important about heaven.

It is quite true that heaven is a place of perfect bliss – devoid of all sorrow and sin, full of exultation and enjoyment – a place where grace and peace reign totally unchallenged. Heaven is where every true treasure and every eternal reward is laid up for the redeemed. Anyone whose destiny is heaven will certainly experience more joy and honor there than the fallen mind is capable of comprehending – infinitely more than any fallen creature deserves. But if you actually saw heaven and lived to tell about it, those things are not what would capture your heart and imagination.

You would be preoccupied instead with the majesty and grace of the One whose glory fills the place.

Sadly, undiscerning readers abound, and they take these postmodern accounts of heaven altogether seriously. The stratospheric sales figures and far-

reaching influence of these books ought to be a matter of serious concern for anyone who truly loves the Word of God.

The Bible on Near-Death Experiences

There is simply no reason to believe anyone who claims to have gone to heaven and returned. John 3:13 says, “No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.” And John 1:18 says, “No one has seen God at any time.

Four biblical authors had visions of heaven – not near-death experiences. Isaiah and Ezekiel (Old Testament prophets) and Paul and John (New Testament apostles) all had such visions. Two other biblical figures – Micaiah and Stephen – got glimpses of heaven, but what they saw is merely mentioned, not described (2 Chronicles 18:18; Acts 7:55).

Only three of these men later wrote about what they saw – and the details they gave were comparatively sparse (Isaiah 6:1-4; Ezekiel 1, 10; revelation 4-6). All of them focused properly on God's glory. They also mentioned their own fear and shame in the presence of such glory. They had nothing to say about the mundane features that are so prominent in modern tales about heaven (things like picnics, games, juvenile attractions, familiar faces, odd conversations, and so on). Paul gave no actual description of heaven but simply said what he saw would be unlawful to utter. In short, the biblical descriptions of heaven could hardly be any more different from today's fanciful stories about heaven.

Lazarus of Bethany fell ill and died, and his body lay decaying in a tomb for four days until Jesus raised him (John 11:17). A whole chapter in John's Gospel is devoted to the story of how Jesus brought him back from the dead. But there's not a hint or a whisper

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anywhere in Scripture about what happened to Lazarus's soul in that four day interim. The same thing is true of every person in Scripture who was ever brought back from the dead, beginning with the widow's son whom Elijah raised in 1 Kings 17:17-24 and culminating with Eutychus, who was healed by Paul in Acts 20:9-12. Not one biblical person ever gave any recorded account of his or her postmortem experience in the realm of departed souls.

Crossing the Boundaries

Far too much of the present interest in heaven, angels, and the afterlife stems from carnal curiosity. It is not a trend biblical Christians should encourage or celebrate. Any pursuit that diminishes people's reliance on the Bible is fraught with grave spiritual dangers – especially if it is something that leads gullible souls into superstition, gnosticism, occultism, New Age philosophies, or any kind of spiritual confusion. Those are undeniably the roads most traveled by people who feed a morbid craving for detailed information about the afterlife, devouring the stories of people who claim to have gone to the realm of the dead and returned.

Scripture never indulges that desire. In the Old Testament era, every attempt to communicate with the dead was deemed a sin on par with sacrificing infants to false gods (Deuteronomy 18:10-12). The Hebrew Scriptures say comparatively little about the disposition of souls after death, and the people of God were strictly forbidden to inquire further on their own. Necromancy was a major feature of Egyptian religion. It also dominated every religion known among the Canaanites. But under Moses's law it was a sin punishable by death (Leviticus 20:27).

The New Testament adds much to our understanding of

heaven (and hell), but we are still not permitted to add our own subjective ideas and experience-based conclusions to what God has specifically revealed through His inerrant Word. Indeed, we are forbidden in all spiritual matters to go beyond what is written (1 Corinthians 4:6).

Those who demand to know more than Scripture tells us about heaven are sinning: "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever" (Deuteronomy 29:29). The limits of our curiosity are thus established by the boundary of biblical revelation. In the words of Charles Spurgeon, "It is a little heaven below, to imagine sweet things. But never think that imagination can picture heaven. When it is most sublime, when it is freest from the dust of earth, when it is carried up by the greatest knowledge, and kept steady by the most extreme caution, imagination cannot picture heaven. It hath not entered the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him." Imagination is good, but not to picture to us heaven. Your imaginary heaven you will find by-and-by to be all a mistake; though you may have piled up fine castles, you will find them to be castles in the air, and they will vanish like thin clouds before the gale. For imagination cannot make a heaven. "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath it entered the heart of man to conceive" it.

What God has revealed in Scripture is the only legitimate place to get a clear understanding of the heavenly kingdom. God's written Word does in fact give us a remarkably full and clear picture of heaven and the spiritual realm. But the Bible still leaves many questions unanswered.

We need to accept the boundaries God Himself has put

on what He has revealed. It is sheer folly to speculate where Scripture is silent. It is sinfully wrong to try to investigate spiritual mysteries using occult means. And it is seriously dangerous to listen to anyone who claims to know more about God, heaven, angels, or the afterlife than God Himself has revealed to us in Scripture.

The Glories of Heaven

It is, however, right and beneficial for Christians to fix their hearts on heaven. Scripture commands us to cultivate that perspective: "If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on earth" (Colossians 3:1-2). "While we do not look at the things which are seen but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:18). ...

But no matter how much they might obsess over what heaven is like, people who fill their heads with a lot of fantastic or delusional ideas from others' near-death experiences have not truly set their minds on things above. If the inerrant biblical truth God has given us is the only reliable knowledge about heaven we have access to (and it is), then that is what should grip our hearts and minds, not the dreams and speculations of human minds.

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