

Ask Hank: JAH372

## HEAVEN IS REAL, but *Heaven Is for Real* Is Really Not

by Hank Hanegraaff

This article first appeared in the Ask Hank column of the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, volume 37, number 02 (2014). For further information or to subscribe to the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL go to: <http://www.equip.org/christian-research-journal/>

---

There is nothing new under the sun. From the time occult parapsychologist Raymond Moody coined the moniker “Near-Death Experience” (NDE) to the present, bestsellers on NDEs have abounded—*Embraced by the Light* by Betty Eadie; *Beyond Death’s Door* by Maurice Rawlings; *The Boy Who Came Back from Heaven* by Kevin Malarkey; *My Journey to Heaven* by Marvin J. Besteman; *90 Minutes in Heaven* by Don Piper—to name just a few. Now there is the hit movie based on the mega-bestselling book *Heaven Is for Real: A Little Boy’s Astounding Story of His Trip to Heaven and Back* by Todd Burpo.

### Ten Reasons I Consider the Movie *Heaven Is for Real* to Be a Dangerous Diversion

1. NDEs are predictably contextualized by the backgrounds and belief systems of those who experience them. As such, they hardly provide a unified conclusion regarding the matters of life and death, heaven and hell, and most importantly the nature of God. Muslims encounter the Holy Spirit as the archangel Gabriel. Buddhists are inexorably guided down the pathway to nirvanic realization of “no self.”
2. The subjective recollections of NDErs are **wildly divergent** and **mutually contradictory**. Logically, while they can all be wrong, they cannot all be right. In the wake of a drowning accident, orthopedic surgeon Mary Neal felt her soul being inexorably pulled toward the entry of a “great and brilliant hall,” in which the dead are given “a final opportunity to choose God—or turn away—for eternity.”<sup>1</sup> Conversely, in *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon’s Journey into the Afterlife*, Dr. Eben Alexander experiences an afterlife in which such choices are wholly unnecessary—“You have nothing to fear.” “There is nothing you can do wrong.” “This,” writes Alexander, “is not only the single most important emotional truth in the universe, but also the single most important *scientific* truth as well.”<sup>2</sup> In short, Neal, Alexander, and, for that matter, the Burpos and a host of other NDErs paint entirely different and conflicting portraits of the afterlife.

3. There is a substantive difference between **clinical death** and **biological death**. Put another way, to be *almost* dead and *absolutely* dead are two entirely different propositions. We may rightly suppose that what is experienced during clinical death and what will be experienced at the climax of death are not one and the same. The point here is that NDEs do not provide definitive knowledge of what happens after death in that NDErs by definition have not actually experienced biological death. In short, a near-death experience is the subjective recollection of an experience that occurred during a state of unconsciousness precipitated by a medical crisis, such as an accident, suicide attempt, or cardiac arrest.<sup>3</sup> As such, an NDE is notoriously unreliable as a means by which to determine what awaits us when “the silver cord is severed” (Eccl. 12:6).
4. There is a clear and present danger in turning to Colton Burpo rather than the Bible respecting those things that allegedly will happen in the future. Has Burpo indeed been shown the future? Is he really a direct eyewitness who is now empowered to settle theological issues that the body of Christ has struggled with throughout its history? Has he really had face-to-face communication with the resurrected Christ, John the Baptist, David, Peter, John, and even the archangel Gabriel? If so, Burpo is a treasure to the body of Christ like unto the Bible. If not, we should dismiss the subjective recollections of a three-year-old and instead hold fast to that which is good (1 Thess. 5:21).
5. While Christ does not tell us the time of His second appearing, Colton is more than happy to! Indeed, according to Colton, it is within the lifetime of his own father. As a result, Pastor Burpo not only knows that he will be alive during the final battle of Armageddon but also that he will personally slay monsters during this cosmic battle with either a sword or a bow and an arrow.
6. Among the biblical writers who “spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet. 1:21), not one dared say that like their Lord they could speak authoritatively about heaven from firsthand knowledge. Nor, in contrast to Burpo, did one of them dare prophesy the century of Christ’s return!
7. In the 14th chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, Dr. Luke chronicles the **near-death experience of Paul**. While it may have been useful to concoct a miraculous resurrection from the dead in the narrative, Luke does no such thing. Instead, he matter-of-factly notes that Paul—revived from near-death—“got up and went back into the city” (Acts 14:20). While one might well imagine Paul writing an epistle after being “caught up to Paradise” (2 Cor. 12:2), he did not so much as countenance the thought. Rather, he humbly refrained from boasting about his celestial experience so that “no one will think more of me than is warranted” (v. 6). In point of fact, unlike Colton Burpo, Paul was not permitted to speak of his “surpassingly great revelations” (v. 7).

8. The Burpos are greatly biased by the subjective specter of **hyperliteralism**. As such, it is not surprising that Colton returned from his alleged trip to heaven with stories of massive pearly gates, brightly colored horses, and a Holy Spirit that is, well, “kind of blue.” Tragically, such exacting literalism is pandemic within the contemporary Christian community. Thus, it is not uncommon to see heaven described as a translucent cube measuring 1500 miles in each direction. One wonders if, by the same token, the present earth is set on pillars. After all, does not the Bible say that God shakes the earth from its place, and makes the pillars tremble (Job 9:6)?
9. **Psychological factors**, including fantasy proneness, may play a part in some NDEs. While it is impossible to say definitively that such is the case with the Burpos, statistically one out of every twelve Americans is predisposed to creating a fantasy out of thin air—and then believing it to be true. Such fantasy proneness is referred to as Grade Five Syndrome. While Grade Five personalities are generally intuitive and intelligent, they also have vivid, visual imaginations. Thus they are highly susceptible to the power of suggestion. A complex of characteristics, including the capacity to believe contradictory experiences, a propensity for the unusual, and an eagerness to trust and please others, makes Grade Five personalities particularly susceptible to NDEs, out-of-body experiences, and the occasional difficulty in distinguishing fantasy from reality.
10. Finally, there is the very real issue of **apostolic authority**. God Himself set the conditions by which new revelations of life after life must be ratified—namely, confirmation by those who were eyewitnesses to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In point of fact, with the death of the apostles, there can be no new revelations—much less new revelations that compromise, confuse, or outright contradict “the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). Paul is the quintessential test case. The apostolic community validated him as an eyewitness to the Resurrection and as an apostle. Thus, revelation received through him—unlike revelations received through modern revelators—may be deemed reliable and binding on the body of Christ.

I do not doubt that some of those who claim to have been to heaven (or hell) have had a subjective experience. But that is precisely the point. Subjective experiences are notoriously unreliable; thus, they must be tested in light of an objective frame of reference—which in Christianity is the Bible. Colton Burpo may genuinely believe that God the Father has enormous wings, blue eyes, and yellow hair; that God the Son is wingless, with sea-green-bluish eyes, brown hair, and a rainbow-colored horse; and that the Holy Spirit is bluish!<sup>4</sup> But we do well to “test everything. Hold on to the good” (1 Thess. 5:21). As Elizabeth Hillstrom, professor of psychology at Wheaton, has wisely warned, “It is possible that some NDE accounts are grossly exaggerated or are even outright fabrications, concocted for profit, publicity or attention. Currently there is a

very strong market for book-length accounts of NDEs, and unfortunately many readers are willing to accept such accounts at face value. This creates a situation that is ripe for exploitation by unscrupulous storytellers.”<sup>5</sup>

For definitive discussion on near-death experiences, see my book *AfterLife: What You Need to Know about Heaven, the Hereafter, and Near-Death Experiences* (Worthy, 2013), in which I answer such question as, What is a near-death experience? Do NDEs provide accurate information on the afterlife? What are the liabilities of NDEs? Can natural explanations account for NDEs? What does the Bible say about NDEs?

—Hank Hanegraaff

Hank Hanegraaff is president of the Christian Research Institute and host of the *Bible Answer Man* daily broadcast (equip.org). Hank has authored more than twenty books, including *The Osteinification of American Christianity* (CRI, 2014).

---

## NOTES

- 1 Mary Neal, quoted in Mark Galli, “Incredible Journeys,” *Christianity Today* 56, 11 (2012): 25.
- 2 Eben Alexander, MD, *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon’s Journey into the Afterlife* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012), 71, emphasis in original.
- 3 See Michael Sabom, “The Shadow of Death (Part One),” *Christian Research Journal* 26, 2 (2003), online at <http://www.equip.org/PDF/DD282-1.pdf>.
- 4 See “Special Guests Todd and Colton Burpo—Part 2,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4pgMOS8Q8nk&feature=related>, viewed March 22, 2012.
- 5 Elizabeth L. Hillstrom, *Testing the Spirits* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 104.