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FROM HEAVEN TO EARTH WITH A STORY THAT SELLS

by Warren Nozaki

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On January 18, 1989, around 11:45 a.m., thirty-nine-year-old Larry Donald Piper's Ford Escort collided head-on with a semi-truck. EMTs arrived shortly thereafter and pronounced him dead at the scene. Unconscious in the wrecked vehicle, Piper claims to have spent ninety minutes at the entrance to heaven, seeing deceased loved ones, hearing celestial music, and walking toward heaven's gate. Before entering, however, God sent him back.

Piper's book, the bestseller *90 Minutes in Heaven: A True Story of Death and Life*, recounts events surrounding his accident and alleged journey to heaven and back again.

Piper is presently touted as a man with "a unique insight into eternity."¹ He has been interviewed numerous times on television programs such as *Praise the Lord*, *The 700 Club*, and *The Coral Ridge Hour*.² His personal experience postures him as a prime candidate for fielding tough questions related to personal eschatology and he addresses inquiries such as whether or not heaven allows pets, self-murderers, friends, unbelievers, infants, and marriage.³

Piper's sensational testimony raises serious questions. Did he actually die? According to the medical definition of death, "life ends with the cessation of all functions of the entire brain." Death is also a process, not occurring in a single moment of time, but determined on a "premise of reversibility." If a person's vital signs and brain functions cease but resume again, then that person was not dead, but only near death.⁴

Scripture also record instances of individuals dying and miraculously being raised for an extension of their own natural lives (e.g. [Mark 5:21-24, 35-43](#); [John 11:1-46](#)), and these defy any naturalistic explanation. It also teaches that the final resurrection of the body occurs at the Second Coming and not prior ([Dan. 12:2](#); [John 5:21-29](#); [6:39-40](#); [11:21-26](#); [1 Cor. 15:12-23](#); [1 Thess. 4:14-17](#)).

Did Piper go to heaven? Memories retained of things happening during the time of being physically near death fall under the category of a Near Death Experience (NDE),⁵ and, perhaps, "a type of general revelation," whereby the soul is between life and death ([Ps. 23:4](#)).⁶ Granting that Piper was physically near death, it is possible that he had an NDE.

Can Piper's memories of heaven be trusted? Knowledge about heaven comes via special revelation. God reveals Himself to man in two ways: general revelation, via nature ([Ps. 19:1-6](#)) and conscience ([Rom. 2:14-15](#)), and special revelation, via Jesus Christ ([John 1:1, 14](#); [Heb. 1:1-2](#)) and Scripture ([2 Tim. 3:16-17](#); [2 Pet. 2:20-21](#)).⁷ Special revelation reveals things about God that cannot be known by general revelation (e.g., salvation and heaven). The Reformation principle of sola Scriptura, furthermore, restricts special revelation to the prophets in the Old Testament and to Jesus and the apostles in the New Testament.⁸

Piper's NDE—if true—is really a type of general revelation, and his experience (and interpretation thereof) is subject to human error. Though he asserts, “Now I can speak authoritatively about heaven from firsthand knowledge,”⁹ Scripture forbids us to take his account as an infallible authority on heaven and the afterlife.

Piper's testimonial of the afterlife is also inconsistent with Scripture. Souls remain conscious after death, but deceased believers are now absent from the body yet present with the Lord (c.f. [2 Cor. 5:8](#)), awaiting their future bodily resurrection. Piper's physical description of his late grandfather Joe Kulbeth's “white hair” and “big banana nose”¹⁰ is, therefore, unscriptural.

Most importantly, biblical accounts of those raised from the dead (cf. [1 Kings 17:17–24](#); [2 Kings 4:18–37](#); [18:21](#); [Matt. 9:19–26](#); [Luke 7:11–15](#); [John 11:1–46](#); [Acts 9:36–43](#); [20:9–12](#)) are never accompanied by heavenly travel testimonials. Even Paul's statement about a man being “caught up to the third heaven” or “Paradise” resists describing any heavenly activity ([2 Cor. 12:2–4](#)).¹¹ Scriptures alone provides answers to questions on the afterlife.

90 Minutes in Heaven is Piper's intriguing testimony of an alleged NDE. Subjective experiences like NDEs, however, are quite vulnerable to misinterpretation and error and must ultimately be tested in the light of the final authority of Scripture. Careful analysis of Piper's account reveals serious inconsistencies with the true revelation of Scripture on the afterlife.

—Warren Nozaki

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notes:

1 Don Piper Ministries, “About Don Piper” (http://www.donpiperministries.com/about_don_piper.as p), accessed June 13, 2008.

2 Ibid.

3 Don Piper Ministries, “Frequently Asked Questions” (<http://www.donpiperministries.com/faqs.asp>), accessed June 13, 2008.

4 Michael Sabom, “The Shadow of Death (Part One),” *Christian Research Journal*, 26, 2 (2003): 16.

5 Sabom, “The Shadow of Death (Part One),” 16.

6 Michael Sabom, “The Shadow of Death (Part Two),” *Christian Research Journal*, 26, 3 (2003): 45, 48–49.

7 Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1982), 26.

8 David T. King, *Holy Scripture: The Ground and Pillar of Our Faith*, vol. 1 (Battle Ground, WA: Christian Resources Incorporated, 2001), 34–35.

9 Piper, 129.

10 Piper, 22.

11 Paul may be writing of himself while at the same time deflecting the perception of being a braggart (Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* [Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993], 513). Whether or not Paul is writing about an NDE is debatable.