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THE SHADOW OF DEATH (PART TWO)

by Michael Sabom

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SYNOPSIS

New Age and occult spirituality have heavily influenced near-death experience (NDE) research. In his book, *Light and Death*, Michael Sabom critically examines the relationship of spiritual beliefs, Christianity in particular, with the NDE. His research yields several conclusions: First, spiritual beliefs appear to affect the interpretation but not the content of an NDE. Second, while psychic interest increases following an NDE, the relationship between psychic experience and the NDE is otherwise unclear. Finally, a deepening of intrinsic faith consistently follows an NDE, but the direction this deepened spirituality takes appears to be influenced by factors other than the NDE itself.

Light and Death has received harsh criticism within the field of near-death studies for exposing the wayward spirituality of many of its leaders and for evaluating the NDE in light of biblical Christianity. Sabom argues that the NDE is neither an overt glimpse of life after death nor a physical manifestation of the dying brain. It is, rather, a spiritual experience that occurs during the process of dying. A face-to-face meeting with God during an NDE is unlikely according to Scripture, but a general revelation of God is possible. Encounters with spirit beings or with "Jesus" are most likely angelic encounters. Considering both the scientific and biblical evidence and remembering that we "see in a mirror dimly" (1 Cor. 13:12 NASB), we can best understand the NDE as the soul entering the "shadow of death" (Ps. 23:4 NASB).

Following the publication of *Life after Life*¹ by Raymond A. Moody, Jr., in 1975, near-death experience (NDE) research focused on the phenomenology of the experience and its scientific and medical explanations. In 1980, Moody warned, "The interesting results of these studies of medical patients who have nearly died should not be used as an excuse for allowing the entrance of spiritualism, with all its bizarre trappings, into medicine. Presumably for as long as there have been human beings, shamans have pretended to put their clients into touch with the spirits of the departed. The history of fraud and fakery associated with such dealings is too well known (and too ancient!) to bear repeating."²

Kenneth Ring sounded an equally prescient note in an article entitled "Psychologist Comments on the Need to Keep Religious Bias Out of Near-Death Research": "There is a dangerously narrow line between questions of religious import and those of religious doctrine. As soon as we step over that line, we run the risk of both unnecessary factionalism and hortatory research...If NDE research ends up simply providing new swords with which to wage old religious wars, I will regret very bitterly my involvement with this work."³

After issuing these warnings, both of these leading NDE researchers did an about-face. Moody set up a "psychomanteum" in an old, abandoned farmhouse in rural Alabama to do exactly what he had warned against: put his clients in touch with the spirits of the departed. As a psychiatrist, he was interested in "the

therapeutic value of reuniting with departed loved ones."⁴ "Mirror gazing," in which one stares at length into a mirror in hopes of catching a vision from beyond the grave, was used to "diagnose a variety of problems, including specific anxieties, depression, and marriage problems."⁵

Ring, meanwhile, turned his research into religious doctrine. He devised a Religious Beliefs Inventory,⁶ which he administered to a group of NDErs whom he dubbed "prophets." Based on negative responses to questions such as those concerning the deity of Jesus Christ and the inspiration of the Bible, Ring concluded that these "prophets" had been led away from a "more *conventional* (Christian) religious orientation,"⁷ and that "the real significance of the NDE here may not be simply that it promotes spiritual growth as much as the *kind* of spiritual growth it promotes" (emphasis added).⁸ Ring then proposed a new religion to reflect these beliefs, one that would "incorporate and yet transcend the traditional Christian perspective";⁹ evidence "a marked shift toward Eastern religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism and spiritual universalism";¹⁰ "make us... 'one congregation united in truth'";¹¹ and culminate in "the emergence of a new messianic movement in our time, one that is planetary in scope and for which the NDE phenomenon itself is pivotal."¹² Ring indeed forged new swords with which to wage old religious wars, and my research for my book *Light and Death*¹³ began shortly thereafter.

LIGHT AND DEATH: FINDINGS ON SPIRITUALITY

In *Light and Death*, I explored relationships between spiritual beliefs and practices and the NDE. Forty-seven NDErs were studied. Two non-NDE control groups were included: 32 patients who had survived cardiac surgery (considered to be a clinical model of near-death¹⁴) and 81 random cardiac patients. Guided by responses on a Spiritual Beliefs Questionnaire, I categorized NDErs as "conservative Christian" (22 persons), "liberal Christian" (13), "God believer" (12), or "atheist" (0). Ring's Life Changes Questionnaire¹⁵ and Greyson's NDE Scale¹⁶ were also used.

No difference was found in the depth, type, or overt spiritual content of the NDE among religious groups. Spirit beings, however, were more frequently identified by Christians as "Jesus" and by God believers as "God."¹⁷

Contrary to most other reports, belief in reincarnation — a hallmark of Eastern and universalistic religions — did not increase following an NDE.¹⁸ This corroborates the findings of at least one other study that found belief in reincarnation to be a direct result of "reading, discussions with others, and personal reflection" and not of the NDE itself.¹⁹ The NDE, furthermore, caused no change in religious doctrinal belief or church affiliation. Church attendance *increased* in all religious groups following an NDE, with the greatest increase found in those holding the most traditional Christian beliefs.²⁰

Intrinsic faith is the type that is internalized and practiced regardless of outside social pressure or personal consequences (as opposed to extrinsic faith practiced for "show," personal status, social goals, etc.).²¹ It does not reference any particular belief system. Following a near-death event, significantly greater increases in intrinsic faith were found in NDErs than in non-NDE control patients²² as measured by Hoge's Intrinsic Religious Motivation Scale.²³

Interest in spiritual phenomena increased in all religious groups following an NDE, but occurrence of such phenomena did not. Non-NDE-associated visions and precognitive encounters were more prevalent in NDErs than in non-NDE control patients, but out-of-body experiences that were not associated with NDEs were reported with similar frequency in both groups.²⁴

In summary, religious beliefs appear to affect the interpretation but not the content of an NDE. Psychic interest does increase following an NDE, and yet the relationship between psychic experience and the NDE is otherwise unclear. NDErs manifest a deepening of intrinsic faith following their experience, but the direction that this deepened spirituality takes — that is, toward an Eastern religion, New Age spirituality, Christianity, and so on — appears to be influenced by factors other than the NDE itself.

NDE "RELIGIOUS WARS"

Following the publication of *Light and Death*, Ring penned a 29-page diatribe charging me with "recklessness," "blatant distortions," and "paranoia." He labeled portions of the book "outlandish," "obviously preposterous," "wayward," "utterly unfounded," and "pure hokum."²⁵ He vigorously objected to my pointing out that he had transgressed his own strictures against hortatory research. At the heart of Ring's complaints lay a deep revulsion for my Christian faith:

In the end, the world according to Sabom seems to be divided into the usual absolute categories: The saved and the damned — and the damnable. Although he did not mention it in his text, in the group of NDErs that Sabom himself identified with — those he called conservative Christians — 86 percent agreed with the statement, "Nonacceptance of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior condemns one to hell in the afterlife." There you are. I suppose that people like me, most of my friends and family are not likely to receive invitations to their garden parties either....I do not have the heart, the interest, or the space to try to review here the final chapter of Sabom's book, entitled "The Bible and the Near-Death Experience"...Suffice it to say that [it contains]...the whole familiar litany of conservative Christian exhortations against anything that might deviate from their understanding of Biblical truth or threaten to undermine it.²⁶

Moody, meanwhile, opined that "the time has come to look at things in a new way, to stop taking everything so seriously, and, in fact, to consider the possibility that the very reason that ordinary people find the subject of the paranormal so continually fascinating is precisely because they do not take it seriously, but, rather, find the whole topic eminently entertaining — a grand diversion."²⁷ Moody's remarks were aimed primarily at Christian "deadfannies, stiffs, bores, nuisances, uptight dogmatists, broken records, and wet blankets....'JAY-zus'-Sayers, Brimfire and Hellstoners, Swaggartists, Falwellers, Bakker-Boosters, Pat Robertsonians, or whatever."²⁸

A GLIMPSE OF LIFE AFTER DEATH?

As these "religious wars" continue, the biblical view of the NDE remains at the crux of the controversy. Most NDErs believe they had a glimpse of the afterlife. The Bible clearly teaches the reality of life after death. It also plainly states, however, that "man is destined to die *once*" (Heb. 9:27 NIV, emphasis added); indeed, the wise woman from Tekoa pictured the finality of death by stating, "Like water spilled on the ground, which cannot be recovered, so we must die" (2 Sam. 14:14 NIV). In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, Jesus taught that the dead do not report back to the living (Luke 16:26–31). Seven persons *were* raised from the dead, however, during thousands of years of biblical history. These were unique situations in which God acted for particular reasons at strategic points in history — such reanimations are hardly commonplace! More importantly, none of these seven people is said to have returned with a report of the afterlife. These incidents do not contradict the teaching of Jesus in Luke 16, and modern-day accounts of NDEs are not accounts of life after death.

On this point I differ with fellow cardiologist and Christian, Maurice Rawlings. In his 1978 bestseller *Beyond Death's Door*,²⁹ Rawlings alerted the NDE field to the presence of the distressing or "hellish" NDE. He claimed, based on insufficient anecdotal evidence, that these "hellish" experiences occurred as frequently as "heavenly" ones if persons were interviewed immediately after the near-death event. This proved not to be the case — except among suicide attempters; distressing NDEs are very uncommon regardless of the timing of the interview. More importantly, Rawlings presented the NDE as a literal trip to heaven or hell — a biblically unsound move, which caused him great difficulty in the interpretation of his data. Applying the Christian doctrine of heaven and hell to these "afterlife voyages," he suggested that a non-Christian would experience a "hellish" NDE, and a Christian a "heavenly" one. In a later book, *To Hell and Back*,³⁰ several inconsistencies occurred in his reporting of NDEs in an apparent attempt to reconcile his data with his hypothesis.³¹ I discussed this with Rawlings, and at one point he volunteered to write an addendum to his book to correct these errors.

IN THE BODY OR APART FROM THE BODY?

In 2 Corinthians 12:1–6, Paul described an experience that some believe may have occurred during his apparent death at Lystra as a result of stoning (Acts 14:19).³² Whether Paul's experience occurred at that time, or whether it was an NDE is uncertain. Paul said he did not know whether he was "in the body or apart from the body...God knows" (v. 3, NASB) during this experience. He repeated this twice for emphasis. During this experience, he was "caught up into Paradise" and heard "inexpressible words."

Paul had difficulty understanding what had happened — a difficulty shared by NDErs: "As God is my witness, I was out of my body and up by the corner ceiling of the hospital room looking down on the situation. I was trying to figure out how I could do that — be up there and be down there at the same time...I thought to myself, *Now this is strange.*"³³ According to seminary professor Douglas Groothuis, "By allowing that he might have been out of the body at the time, Paul *does* grant the possibility of the soul leaving the body to be with God prior to irreversible, biological death" (emphasis added).³⁴ Other Bible scholars agree: "Plainly, though he [Paul] confesses that only God knows precisely what happened, he considers it possible for man's spirit to be temporarily withdrawn from his body even during the continuance of physical life."³⁵ "The apostle here by implication acknowledges the possibility of consciousness and receptivity [e.g., hearing and seeing] in a disembodied state."³⁶ After an exhaustive examination of Paul's experience, W. David Stacey concludes that "it is clear that the subject-self can leave the body even in this life."³⁷

According to theologian R. C. Sproul, humans are "creatures made out of a material body and a non-material soul. The soul is sometimes referred to as a spirit....At death, though the body dies, the soul of both the believer and unbeliever continues to live."³⁸ Sproul asserts, "There is no interruption of life at the end of this life, but we continue to be alive in our personal souls upon death....[at which time] there is a continuity of life and of consciousness."³⁹ At death, consciousness shifts and the soul departs from a physical, in-the-body location, to a spiritual, out-of-body realm with "no interruption." Does this shift take place instantaneously or as a process — a process during which an NDE could occur?

Scientifically, death occurs as a process and not at a single moment in time (see part one of this series). The Bible affirms this process. Rachel's death as she gave birth to Benjamin occurred "as her soul was departing" (Gen. 35:18 NASB), not *when* it departed. This suggests that her soul departed over a period of time and not instantaneously.

How do we reconcile this *process* of dying and departure of the soul with Paul's proclamation that believers are either "at home in the body" and "away from the Lord," or "away from the body" and "at home with the Lord"? Biblically speaking, to be "away from the body" is to be physically dead and, for the Christian, to be with the Lord. Paul, here, seemed to be considering the two extremes of life and death,⁴⁰ not the gray area *between* life and death. His statement does not logically exclude the possibility of an in-between state in which, while dying, the soul is *separating* from the body — a state that Paul seemed to have encountered himself.

Based on this analysis, I agree with Groothuis: "The NDE does give us a glimpse of vast and varying spiritual dimensions....This realm is not the final state of the soul, but an intermediary state of detachment from the body and engagement with an immaterial but not wholly benign spiritual reality."⁴¹ Perhaps this realm is what the ancient Hebrews knew as "the shadow of death."

THE SHADOW OF DEATH

According to noted Old Testament scholar Hermann Gunkel, the "valley of the shadow of death" is the "place through which the ancient Hebrew supposed the soul had to pass on the way to the underworld [i.e., the abode of the dead]."⁴² The Bible distinguishes between this "shadow of death" and "death" itself, suggesting two *different* realms: "Have the gates of death been opened unto thee? or hast thou seen the doors of the shadow of death?" (Job 38:17 KJV) Could the "shadow of death" be the gray area between life and death in which an NDE occurs — a realm whose "doors" can be "seen" (Job 38:17) and whose "valley" or "land" can be "walk[ed] through" (Ps. 23:4) — but from which return is possible?

Meetings with God in the Old Testament were uniformly accompanied with great fear and a “falling down” (e.g., Gen. 17:3; Exod. 3:6; Josh. 5:14; Ezek. 1:28). NDErs, on the other hand, uniformly feel “love,” “joy,” “euphoria,” and “peace” in the presence of the “light.” God instructed Moses, “No one may see me and live” (Exod. 33:20 NIV), and Paul wrote that God “lives in inapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see” (1 Tim. 6:16 NIV). A *direct* encounter with God during the NDE, therefore, is unlikely.

God does reveal Himself indirectly through “general revelation.” This is a dynamic process whereby God unveils His invisible qualities, along with His holy law, *to all people* “from what has been made” (Rom. 1:19–20 NIV) and *within all people* from divine truths “written in their hearts” (Rom. 2:15 KJV). The psalmist, furthermore, declares: “Be still, and know that I am God” (Ps. 46:10 KJV) and, “The Lord will hear when I call unto him....commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still” (Ps. 4:3–4 KJV). Might such a revelation of God be occurring during the “stillness” of near-death when God brings “conviction, counsel, and comfort to his people, unobserved by the world, by private whispers, as powerfully and effectually as by the public ministry”?⁴³ The psalmist declared his assurance that while “I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...thou art with me” (Ps. 23:4 KJV). Perhaps NDEr Pam Reynolds (see part one of this series) says it best: “The light was not God....But it was like I was standing in the breath of God.”⁴⁴

Several findings support the idea that God reveals Himself during an NDE. Following a near-death event, significantly greater increases in intrinsic faith, concern with spiritual matters, sense of the sacred in life, inner sense of God’s presence, belief in a higher power, and belief in life after death were found in NDErs than in non-NDE control patients.⁴⁵ The deeper an NDE, the greater the increase in the importance of religion and religious activity in an NDEr’s life.⁴⁶ Atheist A. J. Ayer described his profoundly distressing NDE during a cardiac arrest as “a badly fitting jigsaw puzzle”⁴⁷ — an apt description of the cognitive and spiritual dissonance resulting from his atheistic convictions clashing with the revelation of God. In suicide attempters, furthermore, the frequent appearance of “hellish” and unpleasant NDEs, along with the unexpectedly low recidivism rate following such NDEs,⁴⁸ may be the result of “whispers of God” convicting the suicidal person that self-murder is incompatible with His holy law.

Following God’s general revelation, however, one’s understanding can be “choked by human superstition and the error of the philosophers....Surely, just as waters boil up from a vast, full spring, so does an immense crowd of gods flow forth from the human mind, while each one, in wandering about with too much license, wrongly invents this or that about God himself.”⁴⁹ Without a special revelation of Jesus Christ in person or in Scripture, spiritually charged NDErs pursue widely differing paths in search of truth and enlightenment.

NDErs frequently report having encountered a spirit being whom they believe to be Jesus. These spirit beings often teach things that contradict the Bible,⁵⁰ making them, by definition, “false Christs” (Matt. 24:24). Some of these encounters lead to biblically sound enlightenment and striking conversions to traditional Christianity.⁵¹

These latter cases still are unlikely to be “face-to-face” meetings with Jesus Christ. The Trinitarian view of God holds that one God exists in three distinct persons and that each of these three persons is fully God, not part of God. We are to be baptized “in the name [not names] of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19 NIV). Since His earthly ministry, Jesus has been seated at the right hand of the Father in heaven (Heb. 1:3; 8:1) and out of sight of the living.

More likely, the spirit beings NDErs encounter are angels, which are known to change shape and appearance at will;⁵² to serve as messengers, comforters, and protectors; to escort the dead and dying (Luke 16:22); and “to serve those who will inherit salvation” (Heb. 1:14 NIV). Angels, however, can also deceive (since some have fallen), appearing as “familiar spirits...capable of adopting ‘familiar’ images and characteristics (e.g., religious figures, deceased relatives, etc.)”;⁵³ even Satan, at times, “masquerades as an angel of light” (2 Cor. 11:14–15 NIV) “so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect” (Matt. 24:24 NASB). Biblically based spiritual discernment is a must in order to avoid being deceived.

A FINAL WARNING

In his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard commented on the scientific search for certain truth:

Suppose a man desires to know the truth of a thing one way or another. To make sure he will come to an accurate knowledge of the truth he embarks upon an objective investigation. Using the approximation process of science, or measurement to within a specific tolerance, the man collects evidence to determine the truth of the matter.

With the help of incremental evidence even the absurd is transformed into something else; First it becomes possible, then reasonably probable, later highly and overwhelmingly probable; at that point it might even be as good as known, but no matter how likely, the very fact that a probability is asserted means that a possibility will always exist that the actual truth of the matter lies with the other side.⁵⁴

When I began my research over 25 years ago, I believed reports of the NDE to be absurd. On closer examination, I found verifiable out-of-body experiences to be inexplicable from a merely physical, scientific standpoint. Biblical research then suggested that these experiences may involve the spiritual dimension. Combining the scientific and biblical evidence, I now find it highly probable that the NDE is a spiritual experience during which the soul enters the “shadow of death.”

Until face-to-face with God after *final* physical death, however, “we see in a mirror dimly” (1 Cor 13:12 NASB) both in scientific and in spiritual matters. The apostle Paul warned accordingly: “Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the head” (Col. 2:18–19 NASB); for without our “head” — Jesus Christ — and our yardstick — the Bible — we quickly lose our way in life, in science, and in understanding the near-death experience.

NOTES

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27. Raymond Moody, Jr., *The Last Laugh: A New Philosophy of Near-Death Experiences, Apparitions, and the Paranormal* (Charlottesville, VA: Hampton Roads, 1999), 164.
28. *Ibid.*, x.
29. Maurice Rawlings, *Beyond Death's Door* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1978).
30. Maurice Rawlings, *To Hell and Back: Life after Death — Startling New Evidence* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1993).
31. Michael Sabom, "Review of *To Hell and Back*," *Journal of Near-Death Studies* 14, 3 (1996): 197-209.
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33. Sabom, *Light and Death*, 202.
34. Douglas R. Groothuis, *Deceived by the Light* (Eugene: Harvest House, 1995), 132. As to the soul "leaving the body to be with God," see my comments regarding "the shadow of death" and general revelation later in this article. It is clear from 2 Corinthians 12:1-7 that Paul, as the apostle to the Gentiles, was given a unique vision and revelation of God that would not be comparable to what is experienced in contemporary NDEs.
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