

What Does the Bible Teach About Near Death Experiences?

(Compiled by Paul R. Blake from multiple sources)

Introduction:

- A. In 2010, Todd Burpo wrote a book entitled, "Is Heaven For Real," in which he detailed his young son's near death experience. It became a New Times Bestseller; and recently, a movie was made of this book and is in theaters.
- B. This is not the first book written on this matter.
 - 1. "Embraced by the Light" by Betty Eadie (1992).
 - 2. "90 Minutes in Heaven" by Don Piper (2004).
 - 3. "Saved by the Light: The True Story of a Man Who Died Twice and the Profound Revelations He Received" by Dannon Brinkley (1995).
 - 4. "23 Minutes in Hell" by Bill Wiese (2006).
 - 5. Plato's Republic - The Myth of Er (380 B.C.).
- C. What are we to make of these emotionally compelling accounts of an afterlife?
 - 1. Either they are lying or they are telling the truth or they are deluded
 - 2. Or they had a profound experience, but interpreted it incorrectly.

I. ARE THEY LYING?

- A. While we don't know the hearts of those who claim these experiences, we have no reason to think that they are deliberately making it up.
- B. These experiences frequently have common elements. 3% of Americans claim some sort of near death or out of body experience
 - 1. A sense/awareness of being dead
 - 2. A sense of peace, well-being and painlessness. Positive emotions. A sense of removal from the world
 - 3. An out-of-body experience. A perception of one's body from an outside perspective. Sometimes observing doctors and nurses performing medical resuscitation efforts
 - 4. A tunnel experience. A sense of moving up, or through, a passageway or staircase through darkness toward light
 - 5. A rapid movement toward and/or sudden immersion in a powerful light. Communication with the light
 - 6. An intense feeling of unconditional love and acceptance.
 - 7. Encountering "Beings of Light", "Beings dressed in white", or similar. Also, the possibility of being reunited with deceased loved ones
 - 8. Receiving a life review, commonly referred to as seeing one's life flash before one's eyes
 - 9. Receiving knowledge about one's life and the nature of the universe
 - 10. Approaching a boundary or a decision by oneself or others to return to one's body, often accompanied by a reluctance to return
 - 11. Connection to the cultural beliefs held by the individual, which seem to dictate the phenomena experienced in the NDE and the later interpretation thereof (Holden, Janice Miner. Handbook of Near-Death Experiences. Library of Congress, 2009.)
 - 12. NDEs are also associated with changes in personality and outlook on life. Kenneth Ring (professor of psychology) has identified a consistent set of value and belief changes associated with people who have had a near-death experience. Among

these changes one finds a greater appreciation for life, higher self-esteem, greater compassion for others, a heightened sense of purpose and self-understanding, desire to learn, elevated spirituality, greater ecological sensitivity and planetary concern, and a feeling of being more intuitive. Changes may also include increased physical sensitivity; diminished tolerance of light, alcohol, and drugs; a feeling that the brain has been "altered" to encompass more; and a feeling that one is now using the "whole brain" rather than a small part. However, not all after-effects are beneficial and Greyson describes circumstances where changes in attitudes and behavior can lead to psychosocial and psycho-spiritual problems. (Wikipedia)

- C. Changes in personality, world view, etc., are due to two factors: The psychological trauma engendered by awareness of proximity to death, and damage to emotive centers of the brain from anoxia

II. ARE THEY EXPERIENCING WHAT THEY THINK THEY ARE EXPERIENCING?

- A. No. We are not questioning their honesty and integrity; we are calling into question their interpretation of the experience
- B. Why should we arrive at that conclusion?
 - 1. Because these experiences contradict the word of God.
 - 2. Experiences, no matter how compelling they may be, cannot contradict God's word - Gal. 1:8-9
 - 3. It is troubling that so many seem to be more moved by these experiences than they are the word of God.
- C. How do these experiences contradict the word of God?
 - 1. John 14:6 - Jesus is the only way to the Father, yet countless people who are not spiritual minded speak of going to Heaven and being enveloped in love and light. (Subjective experience vs Scripture)
 - a. Ian McCormick was stung by a box jelly fish. On the way to the hospital, his life flashed before him. He saw his mother praying for him. However, soon he found himself in Hell, but a bright light lifted him out and he traveled through a tunnel until he met God. God gave him the option of entering Heaven or going back to earth. He chose to go back to earth to help his mother. He was an atheist.
 - 2. John 3:5; Matt. 7:21 - Not all religious people will be saved, yet people who haven't obeyed the gospel speak of going to Heaven
 - b. "In His Arms" - by Denise Mendenhall, (2006). Written by a 16 year old Mormon girl who slipped into a diabetic coma, and suffered a stroke that destroyed most of the left side of her brain. She met Jesus, and he introduced her to our Heavenly Father and Mother. She met the prophets, and even saw Joseph Smith translating the Book of Mormon.

III. ARE THE EXPERIENCES REAL, BUT INCORRECTLY INTERPRETED?

- A. The Bible speaks of men who were given a glimpse into the heavenly realm.
 - 1. Stephen - Acts 7:55-56
 - 2. Paul - 2Cor. 12:1-4, 7
 - 3. John - Rev. 1:9-11
 - 4. But these are not "Near Death Experiences," but rather they are visions given to prophets very much alive.

B. What is happening is a common physiological event that gets re-interpreted by the individuals' own unique backgrounds, philosophies, and values.

1. How else to account for:

- a. Christians seeing Jesus
- b. Hindus seeing Yama (the god of Death).
- c. Buddhists experiencing reincarnation.
- d. Atheists seeing a library and crossing the river Styx.
- e. Muslims seeing a bridge to Jannah (Garden; Paradise)

2. Are we going to concede, based on someone's subjective interpretation of their experience, that all world religions end in heaven?

3. In addition, why don't all people have these experiences? Is the afterlife only for certain ones, and for the rest there is nothing?

C. There are physiological and psychological explanations for these experiences

1. Researchers say that when the heart stops, there is a flurry of electrical activity in the brain (Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America - PNAS). Neural noise, or an overload of information sent to the brain's visual cortex, creates an image of a bright light that gradually grows larger. The brain may interpret this as moving down a dark tunnel toward light. The body's spatial sense is prone to malfunction during a near-death experience as well. Again, the brain interprets faulty information about where the body is in relation to the space around it. The result is the sensation of leaving the body and flying around the room. Combined with other effects of trauma and anoxia (oxygen deprivation in the brain, a symptom in many near-death situations), this leads to the overall experience of floating into space while looking down at your own body, and then leaving to float down a tunnel. The peaceful, calm sensation felt during NDEs is a coping mechanism triggered by increased levels of endorphins produced in the brain during trauma. Many people experience a strange sense of detachment and a lack of emotional response during traumatic events (whether or not they were related to a near-death experience). This is the same effect. NDEs that include visits to Heaven or meetings with God involve a combination of several factors. Faulty sensory input, oxygen deprivation and endorphin-induced euphoria create a surreal, though realistic, experience. When the subject recalls the encounter later, it has passed through the filter of his conscious mind. Bizarre sensory input that seems unexplainable becomes spirit beings, other dimensions and conversations with God.

Conclusion:

A. No doubt people under anesthesia, in great physical stress, or whose heart has stopped for a period of time have had some remarkable experiences. However, interpretations of the experiences often contradict the word of God.

B. The Bible lists many people who died and were raised again. They had genuine afterlife experiences. The scriptures are silent about what they said

C. 1Kings 17:17-24; 2Kings 4:31-37; 2Kings 13:20-21; Matt. 27:52-53; Luke 7:11-17, 8:49-56; John 11:41-44; Acts 9:36-43, 20:9-12

D. In not a single case did God use testimony of what they saw, heard, or experienced as a motivation for them to obey Him.

E. We have something better than the subjective, whimsical testimony of man; we have the inspired word of God. May we be moved by its testimony to obey God while we can so that we will be well prepared for the afterlife.