

## **1. What Lies Beyond Death's Door? Insights into Eternity**

### **Near Death Experiences**

In the year 1976, when I was preparing to travel overland across Asia from England, I realized that I needed to have some vaccination shots against various diseases that were common in India and other countries that I was soon to be visiting. The doctor who administered the shots warned me not to drink any alcohol for at least 24 hours. Later that night, I did something really stupid. (Please do not try this at home!) I did not follow the doctor's advice. I can now say that, since becoming a disciple of Christ 34 years ago, I am a lot wiser than I used to be, but in my teens and early 20s, my life was full of poor choices. I was still heavily into smoking Marijuana, so a night without any substance to stimulate me simply did not seem like a night out.

I already had my evening planned for me after seeing the doctor; I was meeting with my friends who would see me off with a get-together drink down at the pub before my trip across Europe and Asia. Due to the doctor's warning, before going out, I told myself I must not drink. A wise decision, but surely a bit of hashish (a stronger form of marijuana) wouldn't hurt? It would have taken too long to smoke the hash I had, so I ate it and then walked to the pub to meet my friends. As soon as I arrived, my friends bought me a half-pint of beer. I reasoned that it was only half a pint; surely, that little wouldn't do me any harm. Besides, I did not want to be rude to my friends.

I am sure my powers of reasoning were affected by the hash I had eaten. As soon as I had drunk the beer, I started feeling very unwell. I could not control what was going on inside me. The amount of hashish that I had consumed, plus the alcohol, seemed to be too much for my system due to the vaccination shots that I had earlier, and I started to think about the doctor's warning. I got out of the pub knowing that something terrible was happening to me. I resolved that I had to get home to my apartment. Somehow, I was aware that I was close to death.

I staggered into my apartment, laid down on the sofa, and then something weird happened, something that changed everything I had believed up until then. I actually left my body and was hovering parallel to the ceiling over the other side of the room and looking down on my body. This was not a vision or a dream; this was reality. My body was on the sofa, but I was not in it! I began crying out to God to have mercy on me. Up to that point, I was a total atheist with no relatives or friends that were Christians. I thought I didn't believe in God, but all of a sudden, I was praying like there was no tomorrow, and tomorrow was hanging in the balance!

My belief was that, when I am dead, I am dead. However, my theology changed all of a sudden—I was crying out to a God in Whom I didn't believe. I promised Him that, if He let me live, then I would give Him my life; I would do anything He wanted. Life became

very precious, for I was not sure where I would go if this experience were final. All of a sudden, the experience was over, and I was back in my body, alive by the grace of God.

**Warm-up question:** Have you ever had a near death experience or had to say goodbye to someone close? Share your experience with one another.

My brush with death was a turning point in my life. Even though I had promised my life to Christ, the next day I reneged on my promise, having no understanding at all about who God was or how to find him. All I knew or believed at that time was that there was something more beyond life on this planet. I was aware that life was not limited to just this body of flesh. I became fascinated with life after death, trying to understand what happens after death. I remember going to a spiritualist church but not being able to actually go in to find out what they believed. It was like there was some invisible barrier against the door, and each time I tried to go in, my heart started racing, and I couldn't enter. God was very faithful to protect me from spiritualism and the occult.

While I was on that search for understanding, I came across a book that had been written by a doctor who had brought some of his patients back from near-death experiences. The name of the book was *Life after Life*, by Raymond A. Moody, MD. During the 1970s, various new instruments of resuscitation became widely available so that many more people began to survive accidents that normally would prove deadly. Some of his patients told him of their experiences beyond death. Doctor Moody was so intrigued by what these patients shared that he began to talk to other doctors, and he finally acquired a case file of over 150 people that had died and come back after being resuscitated. Many of their interesting stories are shared in his book. There is a striking similarity in the accounts that these 150 people shared. On the basis of these similar accounts, he put together a brief, theoretically "typical" picture of what someone would experience at the point of death:

A man is dying and, as he reaches the point of greatest physical distress, he hears himself pronounced dead by his doctor. He begins to hear an uncomfortable noise, a loud ringing or buzzing, and at the same time feels himself moving very rapidly through a long dark tunnel. After this, he suddenly finds himself outside of his own physical body, but still in the immediate physical environment, and he sees his own body from a distance as though he is a spectator. He watches the resuscitation attempt from this unusual vantage point and is in a state of emotional upheaval.

After a while, he collects himself and becomes more accustomed to his odd condition. He notices that he still has a "body," but one of a very different nature and with very different powers from the physical body he has left behind. Soon other things begin to happen. Others come to meet and to help him. He glimpses the spirits of relatives and friends who have already died, and a loving warm spirit of a kind he has never encountered before—a being of light—appears before him. This being asks him a question, nonverbally, to make him evaluate his life and helps him along by showing him a panoramic, instantaneous playback of the major events of his life. At some point he finds himself approaching some sort of

barrier or border, apparently representing the limit between earthly life and the next life. Yet, he finds that he must go back to earth, that the time for his death has not yet come. At this point he resists, for by now he is taken up with his experiences in the afterlife and does not want to return. He is overwhelmed by intense feelings of joy, love, and peace. Despite his attitude, though, he somehow reunites with his physical body and lives.

Later he tries to tell others, but he has trouble doing so. In the first place, he can find no human words adequate to describe these unearthly episodes. He also finds that others scoff, so he stops telling other people. Still, the experience affects his life profoundly, especially his views about death and its relationship to life.”<sup>1</sup>

I do not know whether Raymond Moody was a Christian at the time he was writing this book, or if he had other spiritual beliefs. He does not specify whether all of the people sharing these experiences were people of faith. Some of them were, but this was not the reason for his book. It was purely to observe the death experience from a scientific viewpoint.

Of course, we must hold books about the afterlife as suspect because Jesus told us that at the end-times there would be many false prophets that would be on the scene (Matthew 24:11). In 1992, Betty Eadie claims to have had an out of the body experience, and in her book, *Embraced by the Light*, for instance, she claims to have been told that Eve had not fallen to temptation but had made a conscious decision to bring about the conditions necessary for progression to godhood. Then, there is the book, *Heaven is for Real*, wherein Wesleyan pastor Todd Burpo tells us of his three-year-old son Colton having a trip to heaven and back. He claims that God looks like Gabriel, only larger, has blue eyes, yellow hair and huge wings; a Jesus with sea-green-bluish eyes, brown hair, no wings, but with a rainbow-colored horse; and a Holy Spirit who is bluish but hard to see.<sup>2</sup> As Christians, we should not accept such claims as true.

Personally, I do not read these kind of books, for when I read in the Scriptures of people seeing Jesus on the other side of the veil, those that see Him are awestruck and fall at His feet as though dead. Such was John the Apostle’s experience in the Book of Revelation, chapter one, verse seventeen. The only book that we can trust as to eternal things is the Bible. I will endeavor to teach you what is clear in Scripture.

The topic of eternity is an important one for us to understand, for the enemy of our souls uses the fear of death to cause anxiety in order to affect our decision-making. To be a mature disciple of Christ depends on your reception of foundational biblical truths that should be laid early on in your Christian life. Two of those foundational truths that we are hoping you build into your life as a result of what you will learn over the next few weeks are as follows:

**Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to**

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<sup>1</sup> Life after Life, Raymond A. Moody. Page 11. Published by Harper San Francisco

<sup>2</sup> Hank Hanegraaff, *After Life*, Worthy Publishing, Brentwood, TN, 2013. Page 5.

death, and of faith in God, <sup>2</sup>instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment (Hebrews 6:1-2, Emphasis mine).

If you will apply the things you learn and take them to heart, these elementary teachings will help you on your walk into maturity in Christ. Some of the things we will explore will be “heavy,” for we will look at what Jesus taught about hell as well as heaven. Jesus made many references to the after life, so it is important to gain a full understanding of what He taught in order to prepare ourselves for the day we will stand before Him. Today, many have become reluctant to mention these things because we live in a culture where materialism rules. Only what we can touch and see is perceived as real, and everything that cannot be weighed, measured, touched or seen is regarded as suspect; how can we believe in what we cannot see?

Jesus lived his life in a totally different way. He challenges us to open our spiritual eyes and see the treasures in the life to come. If we could see clearly and know beyond a shadow of a doubt that we are living this life in preparation for the next, it would radically alter our choices in this life. We would be wise to consider these things now, while we have time to make a difference, not only for our own lives, but also for those around us. This life lasts but an instant compared to eternity, and as Stephen Hawking once said, “Eternity is a very long time, especially towards the end.”

- 1) What strikes you about what you have read concerning these near death experiences?
- 2) How do you think your life would change if you had a near death experience like this and were allowed to return to live the rest of your life?

### **Does the Bible teach Soul Sleep?**

Some believe that, when a Christian dies, his soul sleeps and that he is unconscious until Jesus comes for him at the rapture of the church. The Bible does have a few passages where Jesus talked about death for a Christian as “sleep.” In the case of when Christ raised Lazarus from the dead, He deliberately waited another two days before He even left for the tomb (John 11:6). Have you ever wondered why Jesus waited before starting the journey to Jerusalem to raise Lazarus? The Jews had a tradition that the soul of a person could hang around the body anything up to three days afterward. Jesus deliberately waited so that He could prove to the skeptics that He had authority over death. Lazarus was not sleeping in the tomb, he was dead.

<sup>11</sup>After he had said this, he went on to tell them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up." <sup>12</sup>His disciples replied, "Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better." <sup>13</sup>Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep (John 11:11-13).

Jesus said: “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die” (John 11:25-26).

The Lord also talked about death as sleeping when He brought back Jairus' daughter from the dead:

<sup>49</sup>While Jesus was still speaking, someone came from the house of Jairus, the synagogue ruler. "Your daughter is dead," he said. "Don't bother the teacher any more." <sup>50</sup>Hearing this, Jesus said to Jairus, "Don't be afraid; just believe, and she will be healed." <sup>51</sup>When he arrived at the house of Jairus, he did not let anyone go in with him except Peter, John and James, and the child's father and mother. <sup>52</sup>Meanwhile, all the people were wailing and mourning for her. "Stop wailing," Jesus said. "*She is not dead but asleep.*" <sup>53</sup>They laughed at him, knowing that she was dead. <sup>54</sup>But he took her by the hand and said, "My child, get up!" <sup>55</sup>*Her spirit returned.* and at once she stood up. Then Jesus told them to give her something to eat. <sup>56</sup>Her parents were astonished, but he ordered them not to tell anyone what had happened (Luke 8:49-56, Emphasis mine).

### 3) What can we learn about death from this passage? What things stand out to you?

The believer in Christ is never dead; he is separated from his body, a state that Jesus calls "sleep." When Jesus took the daughter's hand and told her to get up, her spirit returned. Where had the little girl been? Her body was dead and laying on the bed before the Lord and three of His disciples, but the real person, her spirit, was somewhere else. Wouldn't you like to have known what she experienced? A person is only dead, according to the Lord Jesus, when he has not entered into a relationship with Christ (Ephesians 2:1, 5). Spirit and soul seems to be interchangeably used in scripture. In the Old Testament, 1 Kings 17:17, a little boy stopped breathing (NIV translation). In the Hebrew, it literally says that his soul (Heb "nephesh") left. In verse 22 of the same passage, we are told that the boy's life returned to him after Elijah's prayer. The Hebrew word used is "nephesh," which literally says that the boy's soul returned.

We are told that at this moment, in heaven, are the spirits of just men made perfect (Hebrews 12:23), and in another place, that when Christ returns for His church at the Rapture, "God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him" (1 Thessalonians 4:14). Their bodies were in the grave, but they themselves, the unseen part of our nature, our spirit and soul, were with the Lord. We will look more closely at this passage at a later date.

When a man wanted to follow Christ but attend to his father's funeral needs first, Jesus said, "Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead" (Matthew 8:22). Dead people cannot arrange funeral needs; what Christ was saying was to let the spiritually dead arrange the funeral needs of his father; the most important thing for disciples was to reach the dead before they die.

When I get into my car, it is dead until I turn on the ignition. It will do nothing at all without my driving it. In the same way, the real me is composed of a spirit and soul that "drives" my body. The real person lives on beyond death. There is more to life than just this body of flesh.

At a funeral we bury something, not someone; it is the house not the tenant that is lowered into the grave. *Verna Wright*.

<sup>1</sup>Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands (2 Corinthians 5:1).

A close friend of ours living in Israel, a Gentile by the name of Christine, was pregnant several years ago. She miscarried and hemorrhaged on the floor of her home. She died in a pool of her own blood. As her spirit left her body, she immediately began seeing familiar faces of her deceased family and friends that had gone before her. Great feelings of tranquility filled her as they all began singing to her, "Welcome home, Christine." Before her stood the Lord Jesus welcoming her home. He said to her that she could choose to stay there or to go back and finish the work that God had given to her.

At that point, she heard behind her the voice of her husband who had just come into the room where her body lay. He checked her pulse and could see that Christine had already gone. He began to cry out to the Lord in heart-felt anguish, asking the Lord to send her back. Christine told me that she did not remember making a decision to go back, but at that point she came back to her body, opened her eyes, and told her husband not to fear but to get her to the hospital. When they both got to the hospital, the nurses and doctors gave her a blood transfusion, wondering to themselves as to how she was not dead due to the amount of blood loss. The Lord had graciously stepped in and given her more years to complete her work in Israel. She has seen many miracles there in Jerusalem, Israel, as she lives a full life in ministry to the Israeli people.

4) Do you remember a time in your life when it is possible that there was supernatural help in delivering you from an accident that could have resulted in your death?

<sup>15</sup>Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints (Psalm 116:15, NIV).

<sup>15</sup>Precious (important and no light matter) in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints (His loving ones) (Psalm 116:15, Amplified Bible)

5) Why would God be glad at the death of His people, those that have entrusted their lives to him?

How could God be glad at our death if all that happens is that we fall asleep? If we are unconscious at the point of death, why did Jesus say the following words to the thief on the cross? "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). He didn't say, "at the end of the age after a good sleep you will be with me in Paradise." It is clear that Jesus was teaching that before the close of the day, the man would be very much alive and in Paradise with Jesus.

**Is There an Intermediate Place for Those Not Quite Good Enough?**

Why would the Bible be completely silent about an intermediate place called purgatory?

According to the Catholic Encyclopedia, Purgatory is “a place or condition of temporal punishment for those who, departing this life in God's grace, are not entirely free from venial faults, or have not fully paid the satisfaction due to their transgressions.” To summarize, in Catholic theology, Purgatory is a place that a Christian's soul goes to after death to be cleansed of the sins that had not been fully satisfied during life. Is this doctrine of Purgatory in agreement with the Bible? Absolutely not!

Jesus died to pay the penalty for all of our sins (Romans 5:8). Isaiah 53:5 declares,

but He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon Him, and by His wounds we are healed.

Jesus suffered for our sins so that we could be delivered from suffering. To say that we must also suffer for our sins is to say that Jesus' suffering was insufficient. To say that we must atone for our sins by cleansing in Purgatory is to deny the sufficiency of the atoning sacrifice of Jesus (1 John 2:2). The idea that we have to suffer for our sins after death is contrary to everything the Bible says about salvation.

By one sacrifice he has made perfect for ever those who are being made holy (Hebrews 10:14).

### **Sometimes People Can See Two Worlds as They Depart**

Sometimes, as people are dying, their spirit often drifts between earth and heaven where they can see both worlds. A few hours before Dwight L. Moody, the evangelist died, he caught a glimpse of the glory awaiting him. Awakening from a sleep, he said:

Earth recedes, heaven opens before me. If this is death, it is sweet! There is no valley here. God is calling me, and I must go!" His son who was standing by his bedside said, "No, no father, you are dreaming." "No," said Mr. Moody, "I am not dreaming; I have been within the gates; I have seen the children's faces." A short time elapsed and then, following what seemed to the family to be the death struggle, he spoke again: "This is my triumph; this my coronation day! It is glorious!

Some would say that Moody was dreaming, but Scripture also tells us of one who saw both worlds at the point of death. We are talking of Stephen. The passage below happens just after he has shared the gospel with some people that were persecuting Christians:

<sup>54</sup>When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. <sup>55</sup>But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. <sup>56</sup>"Look," he said, "*I see heaven open*

**and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.**" <sup>57</sup>At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, <sup>58</sup>dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. <sup>59</sup>While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." <sup>60</sup>Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell **asleep** (Acts 7:54-60, Emphasis mine).

Can we honestly believe that after seeing Jesus standing to receive him, Stephen, the man of God, then fell into an unconscious sleep? God is not the God of those that are asleep! We are separated from our body at the grave, but every one of us lives beyond death. I believe that Scripture teaches us that eternity starts for every one of us at the point of death. Isn't that what Jesus said about Abraham, Isaac and Jacob?

<sup>26</sup>Now about the dead rising—have you not read in the book of Moses, in the account of the bush, how God said to him, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"? <sup>27</sup>He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken! (Mark 12:26-27).

Paul the apostle wrote: "to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord" (2 Corinthians 5:8). He also writes to the church at Philippi about his desire to die and be with Christ:

<sup>22</sup>If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! <sup>23</sup>I am torn between the two: **I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far;** <sup>24</sup>but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body (Philippians 1:22-24).

Note that Paul is not expecting to be unconscious in sleep when he dies; he fully expects to be very much alive. He calls it better by far! The word, "depart" in verse 23 above is translated from the Greek word that was used for the loosing of an anchor. A.T. Robertson translates it, "To weigh anchor and put out to sea." If Paul was readying himself to go to sleep for two thousand years, I don't see how that could be called "better by far."

Victor Hugo once wrote: "When I go down to the grave I can say, like so many others: I have finished my work, but I cannot say I have finished my life. My day's work will begin the next morning. My tomb is not a blind alley. It is a thoroughfare. It closes in the twilight to open in the dawn."

Ruth Graham Bell in her book, *Legacy of a Pack Rat* tells this verified story of the grandmother of Pastor Humphrey Armistead of Montreat, North Carolina:

The room was quiet and semi-darkened. The elderly lady lying against the pillows listened as her son, Robert, talked of the family, her friends, and other things of interest to her. She looked forward to his daily visits. Madison, where he

lived, was not far from Nashville, and Robert spent as much time as he could with his mother, knowing, as ill as she was, each visit might be his last. As he talked, his eyes took in every detail of her loved face, every line -- and there were more lines than curves now -- the white hair, the tired still loving eyes. When time came to leave, he kissed her gently on the forehead, assuring her he would be back the next day. Arriving back at his home in Madison, he found Robin, his seventeen-year old, was ill with a strange fever. The next few days his time was completely taken up between his son and his mother. He did not tell his mother of Robin's illness. He was her oldest grandson- the pride and joy of her life. Then, suddenly, Robin was gone. His death shocked the whole community as well as his family. The whole thing happened so quickly. And seventeen was too young to die.

As soon as the funeral was over, Mr. Armistead hurried to his mother's bedside, praying nothing in his manner would betray the fact that he had just buried his firstborn. It would be more than his mother could take in her condition. The doctor was in the room as he entered. His mother was lying with her eyes closed. "She's in a coma," the doctor said gently. He knew something of the strain this man had been under, his faithful visits to his mother, the death of his son, the funeral from which he had just come... The doctor put his hand on Mr. Armistead's shoulder in wordless sympathy. "Just sit beside her," he said, "she might come to..." and he left them together. Mr. Armistead's heart was heavy as he sat in the gathering twilight. He lit the lamp on the bedside table, and the shadows receded. Soon she opened her eyes, and smiling in recognition, she put her hand on her son's knee. "Bob..." she said his name lovingly -- and drifted into a coma again. Quietly Mr. Armistead sat on, his hand over hers, his eyes never leaving her face. After awhile there was a slight movement on the pillow. His mother's eyes were open and there was a far off look in them, as if she were seeing beyond the room. A look of wonder passed over her face. "I see Jesus," she exclaimed, adding, "why there's Father and there's Mother." And then, "And there's Robby! I didn't know Robby had died." Her hand patted her son's knee gently. "Poor Bob..." she said softly, and was gone.<sup>3</sup>

How could she have known that Robby had died if she hadn't seen him? She saw him as she was leaving the tent of this earthly body. Death is Graduation Day!

**When they arrive at the gates of death, GOD welcomes those who love him (Psalm 116:15, The Message Translation).**

Prayer: "Lord, help us to live our lives daily with the knowledge that we will one day see You, and help us use the time You have given us to get ready for Eternity. Give us eyes to see what is truly important as we live this life in anticipation of the life to come. Amen.

Pastor Keith Thomas.

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb\\_sb\\_noss?url=search-alias%3Dstripbooks&field-keywords=Legacy+of+a+Pack+Rat+&x=0&y=0](http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb_sb_noss?url=search-alias%3Dstripbooks&field-keywords=Legacy+of+a+Pack+Rat+&x=0&y=0)

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