

## Sermon

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*Is Heaven for Real? A Case Beyond the Ages*

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January 14, 1999. Dr. Mary Neal drowns while kayaking in Chile. After being dead for nearly 40 minutes, she “returns” to share her experience of heaven.

November 14, 2004. Alex Malarkey and his father get into a nearly fatal car accident. Alex regains consciousness after spending two months in a coma. Thereafter, he shares his experience of going to heaven and meeting Jesus, which is eventually published as *The Boy Who Went to Heaven*.

March 5, 2003. Three-year-old Colton Burpo has emergency surgery. In the months that follow, he tells his parents about the experience he had of going to heaven, the account of which would eventually be called *Heaven is for Real* and sell six million copies. In 2014 it would be adapted to the screen, only to become the second-highest grossing Christian film of all time.

Critics have since blasted the “heaven boom” or what Tim Challies, a pastor and blogger, calls “heavenly tourism.” The problem with this industry of tall tales from the other side, he says, is that it’s cruel and unbiblical. Why would God rip someone away from their encounter with true bliss by sending them back to earth? he asks. And why would anyone need additional “proof” concerning heaven beyond what the Bible tells us?

Isn’t the Bible enough?

“You dishonor God,” Challies writes with the fury of a prophet, “if you choose to believe what the Bible says only when you receive some kind of outside verification.” Jesus seems to say the same thing in our Gospel reading for today, “Blessed are those who have *not seen* and yet have come to believe” (John 20:29; italics mine).

### **So, What Does the Bible Say?**

The trouble is that critics of the “heaven boom” rarely address what the Bible actually says about near-death experiences. This leaves us with a mystery, not unlike the one last week. Do we go to heaven after we die, according to Scripture, and has anyone returned to tell us what it’s like?

I used to think the authors of Scripture never speak about near-death experiences because the people of the time did not have access to modern medicine and its methods of reanimation like cardiopulmonary resuscitation. But I was wrong. Roughly half a dozen instances occur in Scripture where someone dies and then returns to life.

Can you guess who these people are?

Naturally, we have the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Remember too story of Lazarus who came back from the dead after spending four days “deep, deep into the ground,” to cite an old Dave Matthews song. Jesus likewise resuscitated the daughter of Jarius, a leader of the synagogue in Capernaum, even though he tells Jarius that his “child is not dead but [merely] sleeping” (Mark 5:39). The same miracle occurs in 2 Kings 4 where the Prophet Elisha restores life to a young boy.

Yet here’s what fascinating: in all of these accounts we hear nothing the formerly deceased visiting heaven. Lazarus remains silent, as do the boy and the girl. Sure, the Apostle Paul talks about the mystical experience of being “caught up in the third heaven” and encountering paradise, but he was alive when that happened. Even then, in contrast to the accounts of Colton Burpo or Mary Neal, he “heard things that are not to be told, and that no mortal is permitted to repeat” (2 Corinthians 12:4). This leaves us with only one exception as to a report concerning the interim between life and death in the New Testament –

Jesus.

We have two accounts concerning what happened to Jesus during the period between his death and resurrection. The first appears in 1 Peter 3:18-19, which tells us that after he died, he went and preached “to the spirits in prison.” Traditions calls it the “harrowing of hell” in which Christ brings salvation to the souls held in captivity since the beginning of the world.

The second reference to the interim between Jesus’ death and resurrection appears in Ephesians 4:9-10. It says that he “descended into the lower parts of the earth” and then “ascended far above the heavens,” thus filling the whole world with his presence like a sack of grain. Notice again that, short of going to heaven, we have no account regarding what Jesus encountered in heaven.

Jesus aside, the most interesting story to me of someone in the Bible who comes back from the dead occurs in 1 Samuel 28. There we encounter a sorcerer who brings the Prophet Samuel back from the dead. “Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up,” he asks, referring by implication to *sheol*, the subterranean abode of the dead where human souls, sometimes called “shades,” go to rest.

The equation of rest with death appears throughout the writings of Paul, the next stop in our investigation.

## **To Die, to Sleep**

Paul uses sleep as a euphemism for death. In 1 Corinthians 15, for example, he says that if Christ has not been raised, then those who have “fallen asleep” have perished. When you die, in other words, you sleep. You rest in peace.

Now sleeping seems a long way off from the itineraries of those who claim to have visited heaven after they die! Obviously, some people have out-of-body

experiences we cannot explain. The Bible, however, largely remains silent on the subject. For its writers, especially Paul, to die, as Shakespeare's Hamlet puts it, means "to sleep." Who knows thereafter "what dreams may come"?

Will we wake up once we sleep "deep, deep in the ground"? That is the true hope of the Christian faith. Sure, writers like Paul speak of heaven but notice what they say! In Philippians 3:19-21, for instance, Paul compares the eternal destiny of Christians to those for whom "their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame [because] their minds are set on earthly things." By contrast, he says, the "citizenship" of those who follow Christ "is in heaven, and it is *from there* that we are expecting a savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will *transform* the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself."

Did you hear that? Paul says nothing about us going to heaven, although presumably our souls rest "there" in peace after we die. Instead, the savior comes from heaven to us! Why? Because, "as the firstborn of the dead," to cite Revelation 1:5, our second reading for today, he will transform us here! The world will be made anew. We will wake up on the last day, the eighth day of God's creation, when God – now as Revelation 21 says – will form something new out of the old as "the holy city, the new Jerusalem [comes] down out of heaven from God" who will make the restored earth God's home, wiping every tear from the eyes who have suffered over the ages. Only then, the text concludes, will "death be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."

You think a tour of heaven is the promise? The promise of what "dreams may come" surpasses it exponentially in Revelation, such that we along with the whole cosmos will be transformed.

### **What Does this Mean for Us?**

The biblical promise concerning our transformation here is not something that awaits us on what the Orthodox tradition calls the eighth day of creation, one where God completes the work God began in Genesis 1. It starts now! Jesus' life and ministry inaugurated the Kingdom of God. His death and resurrection introduce a new state of things, one in which we can participate here. Whenever we experience the power of renewal, the courage to be, the power of being in the face of our infirmities, our despair, our loneliness, our grief, we glimpse the new creation that awaits its completion on the last day.

And when we don't experience these things but want them, we pray for them. God, we pray, following Ephesians 3, grant that we may be strengthened in our inner being with power through the Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith, as we are being rooted and grounded in love. Help us to

know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that we may be filled with the fullness of God no matter what the adversity.

When it comes finally to the death each of us must undergo, Jesus advises us not simply to believe, as our translation today indicates in today's Gospel reading from John. He invites us to *trust* in the face of what we do not know. When I die, I might say to myself, I will go to sleep. The lights will grow dim and my consciousness will fade to black. But one day, perhaps after eons of timeless rest, God will awaken me to something new.

Martin Luther once shared the following story: when the last day of the old creation arrives, he said, the Spirit will come to me and whisper, "Martin, it's time to get up." As with ordinary sleep, the great reformer would know nothing of time and its duration, even if millions of years passed nor would he embark on any heavenly or celestial tours. Instead, he would simply rest.

He would sleep.

But then, in the twinkling of an eye, God will wake him up to a new creation. What happened to Jesus in his resurrection will happen to him – and to us. Here we discover that to die, to sleep, means *more* perchance than to dream. It serves instead as the prelude to a new world, to a new creation. You and I will once again wake up. This is Luther's hope. This is the teaching of the New Testament. This is God's promise to you.

### **The Heaven Boom is a Bust**

It's one thing to claim you've had an out-of-body experience. It's another to claim that in so doing you got a tour of heaven, met Jesus, or saw angels. The critics are right. These accounts are not biblical. Our investigation discovered even how Paul, were he alive today, would condemn the entire industry of tall tales from the other side.

Detective Sam Spade would be proud.

Yet even critics of the heaven boom deserve criticism. While they rightly condemn every celestial itinerary out there as a hoax, and while they point out that some, including Alex Malarkey, have since admitted that their stories were lies, they still seem to think that heaven is a place to which we go and remain forever after we die!

The New Testament, on the other hand, sees things differently. Heaven may be a layover, but it's not the final destination. God promises something even bigger.

May we look for the resurrection God promises, may we experience its renewing power in our faith, and may we cling to it in the end.

Amen.