**Lesson: Has Anyone Seen Heaven?**

Definitely, many books have been written and many movies have been produced about near-death and out-of-body experiences, not to mention people visiting heaven or hell, along with their descriptions of events, people and places they supposedly encountered. In general, heaven is described as a pleasant place with good people and hell is just the opposite. However, this information has been available from days of old. Well, did these people really see heaven or hell, to include deceased relatives and other conditions described from their visions? As always, we need to look into God’s Word. If there is disagreement among witnesses, we know the Bible will be the most credible witness.

There is only one clear example in the Bible when someone got a view of heaven, and that event is reported by the apostle Paul (2 CO 12:2–4). Paul spoke of a man who was “caught up to the third heaven” meaning God’s domain; ordinarily, the first heaven is associated with sky (atmosphere) and the second heaven with outer space (cosmos). Whatever was seen and heard during that occasion, Paul was not permitted to reveal it. Paul goes on to say that his job was to tell the truth, not to exalt himself or to be exalted by others. To ensure this, Paul was given a “thorn in the flesh” which Satan used to pummel Paul, lest he be exalted (2 CO 12:5–7). Perhaps the guy who was “caught up” into heaven was Paul himself, but this is unclear. Either way, Paul was prohibited from providing further details about the experience and who experienced it.

* 2 CO 12:2–4 ~ I knew a man in Christ over fourteen years ago (whether in the body or out of the body, I cannot tell, but God knows). This man was caught up to the third heaven, and I knew this man. How he was caught up into paradise to hear unspeakable words I am not free to explain.

Paul’s episode is similar to one described by the apostle John (REV 10:1–6), in that both experienced a supernatural phenomenon but were commanded by God to exclude something they had learned from being disclosed in their report. John observed an angel speaking, followed by thundering voices proclaiming things which John was not allowed to write. John was then directed by that same angel to “prophesy before many peoples, nations, tongues, and kings.” This angel, and the seventh angel sounding the final trumpet announcing Jesus’s return, are one in the same (1 CO 15:51–52). We only get the second half of the angel’s message which refers to the completion of time (REV 10:7–11). Whatever Paul and John witnessed, it wasn’t for public consumption; in both cases, a portion of their testimony was withheld.

* REV 10:1–6 ~ I saw another mighty angel descend from heaven in a cloud. He had a rainbow over his head, his face shown like the sun, and his feet were as a flaming fire. In his hand was a small, opened book. The angel stepped his right foot upon the sea and the left upon the earth. He cried aloud like a roaring lion; after he spoke, seven thunders uttered their voices. I was about to write when a voice from heaven told me, “Seal up those things which the seven thunders uttered and do not write them down.”

Another similarity between Paul’s and John’s vison reflects an inheritance available in heaven, as well as the inheritance awaiting those going to the other place. The prophets have declared that nobody has seen or heard what God has prepared for the next life (ISA 64:4; 1 CO 2:9); but people sure get enough of a glimpse in scripture to make up their minds about both destinations. The two visions described above have a third thing in common: the prophets lived to bear witness; that is, Paul and John would carry on, and not die until their assigned tasks were accomplished. And they knew they were not done as explained in their testimony; and you aren’t done either, at least not yet. “It ain’t over till it’s over,” to reiterate a phrase from Yogi Berra.

Doubtless, Paul likely had numerous near-death experiences, which he chose not to dwell upon (ACT 14:19; 2 CO 6:3,9). He surely suffered more than most; but miraculously, he’d be up and back on the road posthaste (ACT 14:20). Obviously, “near death” doesn’t have much in common with dead. And when people are brought back from the dead, they are not “nearly” dead, but fully alive body, mind and spirit. Notice how those who had their lives extended by God to minister and testify (such as Lazarus), left no records concerning their familiarity with the other side. How can we be sure? Well, if it was written in the Bible it’s because God wanted it recorded, and the reason it is not is because God didn’t want it recorded. People purporting to think they know through personal experience about the afterlife, and then making a spectacle of themselves, would appear to be violating a basic principle outlined above. They exhibit self-exaltation and hence, their testimony is untrustworthy.

* ACT 14:19–22 ~ Some Jews from Antioch and Iconium came, persuading the people to stone Paul. They dragged him out of the city figuring he was dead. The disciples gathered him up and went back into the city. The next day, Paul and Barnabas left for Derbe where they preached the good news and won many disciples. Next, they left for Lystra, then on to Iconium and Antioch. And many more disciples were confirmed, in the knowledge of the trials and tribulations associated with faith.

I guess everyone gets a premonition of heaven and hell. Likewise, the consequences and circumstances determining which route one should take in life are readily available to everybody reaching the age of accountability (NUM 14:29–31; ISA 15:18; 2 PE 3:9). The mass media also provide images and scenarios which have proliferated over the years and stimulate these ideas. It stands to reason that an end-of-life or out-of-body experience would produce similar pictures or perceptions for most everyone. Indeed, it does to some degree; consolidation of the available literature on the subject displays many consistencies, even with scripture. Anyone can see the contrast of heaven and hell, light and darkness, and good and evil everywhere and frequently. Who wouldn’t contemplate such things if they figured they were about to die? Who wouldn’t give prayer a chance when encountering the threshold of demise? Well the answer to these questions is, far too many.

Keep in mind there also are noteworthy dissimilarities among the various testimonials regarding alleged visits to the other side. And that poses a reliability problem, statistically speaking. The similarities are what you would expect but the differences tend to contradict scripture. How do you weed out the false testimony from the truthful? You compare it to the Word of God, whether it is in agreement. But even if the descriptions are in agreement with scripture, this is not evidence that the testifier experienced the other side. Because nobody has seen or heard, remember?

What would motivate one to testify that they went to heaven or hell? How could that possibly be verified by the dreamer or anyone else? Well, look out; because many are telling their stories for attention, profit, self-aggrandizement, or whatever. That’s why critical elements of their stories don’t agree; these people really didn’t go anywhere outside of their own minds. When the spirit and the mind have departed, the body is dead as can be; and the deceased has already thought their last thought on the earth. Even if these people believe what they saw and boldly declare it, who can confirm their vision? Maybe they dreamt it, maybe God provided a revelation, maybe they made it up. The nice thing about the Holy Bible is this: the testimony of the prophets and apostles can be verified using additional reliable sources. But the single testimony of one person, however convincing, will always be suspect. That doesn’t mean they are lying; it means they could be mistaken. Or, they could be lying in order to get the attention.

Like Paul said: he didn’t know if the experience was in the body or out of the body. Neither does anybody else know, and neither can the experience be measured, observed, or objectified. That such visionaries repeat the same things others do, which are revealed in the literature as well as the Bible, should not raise anyone’s eyebrows. This is more commonplace than people may think. When in limbo, people may remember things long suppressed, and they may see faces of people long passed; and they might even be able to possess some awareness of things happening in the physical world although they do not appear to be conscious or responsive. And certain details may be confirmed by their relatives; but this is not evidence of an actual visit to heaven or hell. What these witnesses cannot relate is that which God has forbidden from revealing until Christ returns.

Many scriptures suggest that nobody gets to visit the other side, until death. Which means nobody can return as a disembodied spirit which was discussed in the previous lesson. You die, and then that’s it for this life (JOB 7:9–10; ECC 9:5–6; PSA 6:5; HEB 9:27); you don’t go to heaven or hell and come back to tell about it (1 TH 4:13–17). On rare occasions noted in scripture people were brought back from the dead; like Paul, they probably didn’t dwell on the afterlife but on the promise of eternal life. No doubt, they lived their renewed life looking forward, not backward.

Anyone saying they went to heaven and were in the presence of God in their degenerate state are misguided. That doesn’t mean people will never be visited by angels or Jesus Christ through a vision or a dream (JOE 2:28). Certainly, Paul was visited during his conversion and John when he received and wrote the Revelation of Jesus Christ. God came down from heaven to speak to the prophets; but they did not go up to speak with Him and return later to blab about things God keeps to Himself. He obviously holds it back until we are ready for it.

* EXO 33:17–20 ~ Moses asked God to reveal His glory. God replied, “Nobody can see my face and live… But before my glory passes by you, I will place you inside the cliff and cover your face with my hand; when I take away my hand you will see only my back in departing.”
* JOH 1:18 ~ No man has seen God at any time. It is the Son of Man, who is in the bosom of the Father, that declares Him.
* REV 21:27 ~ By no means will anyone enter into heaven who is defiled, does abominable things, or invents lies; only those who are written in the Lamb’s Book of Life will enter there.

It makes perfect sense that someone teetering on death may invite Jesus to visit, or ask Him to forgive and bless them (LUK 23:39–43); and I expect He would do just that because He has promised to (MAT 7:7; ROM 10:12–13). Those who have never beckoned Jesus to call on them are likely to perceive something more remorseful during a death-defying experience. Many have come to Christ as the result of a vision, recurring dream, or near-death episode; such incidents are related by converts from Islam, Buddhism, and previous followers of other false religions. The Holy Spirit arouses them into faith and they are saved as a result of the encounter, whether by vision or revelation.

When a person doesn’t know Christ, he or she will be more easily fooled by a figure of light; because malevolent spirits often disguise themselves as benevolent ones (2 CO 11:14–17). This is likely the case for such mystics as Buddha and Mohammed; both fasted for weeks before purportedly receiving a vision of a spirit of light. Since their correspondence contradicts the Holy Bible, it seems they were listening to the wrong spirit. Perhaps they were deliberately attempting to deceive, as is the case for many tale-tellers proclaiming experiences in heaven and hell or face-to-face conversations with God. How can a person tell the difference between a vision from God verses one from Satan without the Spirit of Christ guiding them? Perhaps that’s why hoards are leaving the other world religions in a quest for truth, and end up joining Christendom.

Just before he died, Stephen saw heaven and Jesus sitting at the right hand of God; then Stephen called to Jesus to take him home (ACT 7:55–60). Paul was actually a party to Stephen’s last stand (ACT 7:58); this was prior to Paul’s conversion from Saul (ACT 9:1–17). Stephen knew exactly where he was going prior to his death. His was not a near-death experience for he was alive and ready to be taken to paradise upon his impending demise. True Christians know what Stephen knew and will not be caught by surprise; and they will know in their heart their next destination. They may even see a vision of it in their mind as they lay dying. If you are not sure about your visions or sources, you do not have your house in order; and time’s-a-wasting folks.

I recommend taking afterlife stories with a grain of salt. Yes, they can be inspirational and interesting, but not necessarily factual. Like the Bible says, “Test what the spirits and seers put out against what the Bible says” (2 CO 11:13; 1 TH 5:21; 1 JO 4:1–13). Likewise, test what is being placed into a book or a movie in light of what the Bible says. Those who are less educated or otherwise ignorant of God’s Word produce deviations from the “normal” view of heaven and hell. While there is a common thread in many of the various presentations, there also is divergence regarding critical aspects of Christian theology. Therefore, before believing these stories, it helps to know the scriptures; better yet, it is best to believe the scriptures. Surely, embellishment is a tricky if not risky business when the things being portrayed are in discord with Biblical truth; naturally, one should expect this from an imposter or a spirit of darkness.

Remember this, experience is not the quintessential avenue to enlightenment, but the Bible is. Gleaning truth and enlightenment from the Bible will require intense study, however. There is no easy road to salvation (MAT 7:14). You cannot drop acid, have a “religious” experience, and decide you can see, hear, or feel God in this manner. Hint: It was a hallucination, duh. That’s why people take illicit drugs, they are motivated to experience something unusual, abnormal, or supernatural.

Another thing to consider is this: a person in a physically incapacitated, mentally delirious, or heavily medicated state are subject to hallucinations and delusions; that is, it is normal to experience psychotic features producing sounds and sights that are fantastical or unreal under these conditions. Further, to a person suffering from psychosis, such as a paranoid schizophrenic, the hallucinations and delusions seem real; and I’m sure people remembering near-death experiences might say the same thing. But the event is just as unreal as it would be if the person happened to be under the influence of drugs, medication, evil entities, delirium, or otherwise was mentally, medically, and/or spiritually vulnerable. That is, distortions to reality are likely during altered states of consciousness no matter what the cause. This alone makes such testimony admissible only in the court of opinion.

Invite the Holy Spirit to come in, and you will never be persuaded by the superstitions of others. You will know in your heart when a revelation is real or contrived if you are well versed in the Bible, because such disclosures will be backed up by scripture. And this will illuminate the path in which the Lord is leading you. These experiences are supposed to be personal, not something that needs to be publicized. By making them public it draws attention to oneself; but God wants to draw attention to Him.

Where and when your path ends, God only knows. Death is always imminent, my friends. Every moment can be considered a near-death moment from now on, until the time Christ returns, after which you will remain forever in either the lost or the found column. For some, it may be the last thing they think before drawing a complete blank.

By Andrew V. Barber (Posted 10/29/2020)

From Fundamentals of Christianity: A Bible Study and Guide (Fourth Edition).