

[Heaven Tourism](#) [1]

by: [Alvin Clair Auker](#) [2]

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In 2004, a car accident critically injured six-year-old Alex Malarkey. After two months he emerged from a coma, permanently paralyzed but with stories detailing out-of-body experiences and several trips to heaven. A number of years later, in 2010, a major evangelical book publisher released his story titled, *The Boy Who Came Back from Heaven: A True Story*, listing Alex and his father as co-authors. The book rose quickly to the bestseller list and sold over a million copies.

Then, in January, 2015, the 16-year-old Alex wrote an open letter to Christian publishers and bookstores, stating that he did not die nor did he go to heaven, but rather had made up the story to get attention. The publisher quickly pulled the book off the market.

This book is only one of many in a genre, sometimes called “heaven tourism,” which has become popular in recent years. Several have sold millions of copies, and some have even been made into movies. Typically, in these stories someone dies (or at least is thought to have died), then miraculously revives to tell about a supposed visit to heaven. A similar book describing a man’s experience in hell also became a best-seller, although it was not as successful as the more popular “heaven tourism” books.

What should serious Bible believers do with such accounts? Do these books belong on our shelves? Should we be surprised when one is eventually declared to be fake? Do we find support for these stories in Scripture? Does the Bible give us any examples of people dying and then coming back to life with stories of heaven or hell? Are there any cases of so-called “near death” experiences which reveal divine Truth?

The Biblical Model

The Bible tells us of only a few saints who were privileged to see into heaven and tell what they saw. Micaiah’s glimpse of heaven (2 Chronicles 18:18-22) was a brief prophetic vision, not a death experience. Although Stephen was near death, he was actually still alive on this earth when he saw heaven (Acts 7:55-56); he did not go to heaven and then come back.

In Ezekiel chapters 1 & 2, Isaiah chapter 6, and Revelations chapters 4, 6, & 21, the authors wrote more extensive descriptions of heaven. But here again, these were not death experiences but rather visions of divine revelation given by God for the specific purpose of being recorded in His Holy Word.

The Old and New Testaments tell of several individuals who died and were later raised to life, such as Lazarus. Of these, we do not read anything about their heavenly experience, or that they told of it to others.

A very interesting example is that of the Apostle Paul. He told of being caught up to the third heaven and hearing unspeakable words in paradise (2 Corinthians 12:1-4). Did he die or just

see a vision? We really do not know, because Paul himself said that he could not tell whether he was in the body or out of the body. Either way, what we see as noteworthy is he declared that the words which he had heard were “not lawful for a man to utter.”

God did not give him a license to build a multi-million-dollar ministry from his sensational story (Titus 1:11; 1 Peter 5:2). In fact, God gave him a thorn in the flesh to keep him humble about it (2 Corinthians 12:7). So rather than glory in his personal experience, Paul gloried in the power and cross of Jesus Christ.

Supposing somebody today were to actually have a genuine vision of heaven, why would they not follow Paul’s example and humbly keep quiet about it, choosing rather to glory in Christ?

To answer our earlier question, we see no example in Scripture of a person dying and returning with a story from other realms. Furthermore, in at least one case a saint who had a heavenly vision was forbidden from telling their story.

Thus on the basis of Scripture, we conclude that God has sealed up many details about the future. These are secret things that belong to Him. The things that belong to us are the things He has chosen to reveal through His Word. “The secret things belong unto the Lord our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law” (Deuteronomy 29:29).

We may also conclude that taking people out of this world and sending them back again is not God’s method of revealing truth about heaven and hell. We learn this not only from the absence of Bible examples, but from the mouth of Jesus Himself.

The Teaching of Jesus

In Jesus’ account of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31), after both men died, the rich man who was in hell’s torments looked up and saw Abraham and Lazarus “afar off”. After the rich man’s plea for water was denied, he had this following conversation with Abraham:

- Rich man: “I pray thee therefore, father, that thou wouldest send [Lazarus] to my father’s house: For I have five brethren; that he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torment.”
- Abraham: “They have Moses and the prophets; let them [your brothers] hear them [Moses and the prophets].”
- Rich man: “Nay, father Abraham: but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent.”
- Abraham: “If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead.”

In Abraham’s answer we notice two pertinent truths.

1. First, a human returning from death with a story would be ineffective; according to Jesus it would not convince the skeptic. Let’s apply this truth to these back-from-heaven-or-hell books. Are they claiming to convince people that the Bible is true? If so, they are built on a premise that has no foundation in Scripture. As Jesus narrated the

story, He quoted Abraham as declaring that this method would not work.

2. The second truth in Abraham's words is this: God's written Word is His chosen method for revealing the truth we need to prepare for the life to come. "They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them." Applying this second truth, do these books claim to be a **"new" source of divine revelation**? If so, they again are on an unscriptural footing. We have Moses and the prophets and even the very words of Jesus and His Apostles in the New Testament; let us read them! What more do we need?

End-Time Deception

This brings us to the greatest danger of these books: accepting them as reliable eyewitness accounts opens the door to deception. Where **they contradict each other** and where **they disagree with God's Word**, what will the reader choose to believe – God's originally revealed truth (as found in the Scriptures) or someone's claim about God speaking personally to them, revealing new truth?

If we look to some other book in order to prove that the Bible is true, are we not giving that book equal authority to, or greater authority than, God's own Word? And are we not getting it all backwards? **We should rather be using the Bible to prove all other writings to be true or false**, in the same manner that the noble Bereans did with the messages they heard (Acts 17:11).

But if we accept another book as a new revelation from God, we are putting that book on a pedestal where we cannot criticize it on the basis of the Scriptures. After all, if it comes from God then surely it cannot be wrong.

God warns us about new revelations that disagrees with His Word. "But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed" (Galatians 1:8). If we are to reject even an angel from heaven who preaches contrary to the original revealed truth of God's Word, should it even be a question for us about what we should do with a story told by a person who claims to have returned from heaven?

Angel Enthusiasm

On the subject of angels, let's briefly consider a related issue. Recently stories have circulated about individuals seeing visions of angels showing revealing scenes of the spirit world, of heaven or hell, and giving direct spiritual advice and commands. Although these were not "death experiences," we can apply the same principles to these accounts as well. Is this God's method of revealing truth about the eternal realms and spiritual truth? What should we do with the details which do not line up with God's Word?

There is a sobering reason God warns us about angelic messages. Referring to false teachers, He says, "Satan himself is transformed into an 'angel' of light. Therefore, it is no great thing if his ministers also be transformed as the ministers of righteousness" (2 Corinthians 11:14-15). As former angels from heaven, Lucifer and his hosts are experts at masquerading as "angels of light." If they can convince people that they are bringing new revelation from God, then **the door to deception is again left wide open**.

This is not to judge the motives of the authors of any of these books. We realize that some

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individuals may sincerely believe that they saw heaven, a heavenly vision, or a heavenly messenger. While we are not prepared to categorize each story as imagination, hallucination, or demonic deception, **we can be sure, based on God's Word that we cannot and should not accept them as "truth" which is from God.**

There is a part of us that likes a sensational story. The natural man wants to see and feel before believing, just like Thomas (John 20:25). But when we follow feelings instead of faith in the facts of God's Word **we will always be led astray.** Do we crave the sensational because our faith in God's Word is weak, or is it because we do not love His Word as much as we should? Maybe the Scriptures seem too dull, opening the door for us to think that we must look for something new and exciting.

Whenever we see or hear a sensational account, especially one that claims to be proving the Bible as true or one that claims to be revealing divine truth outside of the Bible, red flags should go up in our minds. Let us throw all the dangerous books onto the Acts 19:19 pile where they belong and get back to the Bible.

Do we want to tour heaven? God's Word gives us some qualifying requirements in order to tour heaven someday in the future. Our robes must be washed and made white in the Blood of the Lamb, and our lives yielded to lordship of Jesus Christ, shown by walking in clear obedience to His commandments as revealed in the Scriptures. No book should persuade us that someone could bypass the only Way to the Father (Jesus as revealed in the Bible).

Then for a true picture of heaven, we should read the passages which are written about heaven in God's Book. Here we have the firsthand account of the best eyewitness of all, the One who came from God to be "the exact representation of the Father", and who now dwells forever in the heavens. What better testimony could there be than that?

Reading and believing the Bible will strengthen our faith and sharpen our vision of heaven, making it more real to us than a story of mere human experience, imagination, dreams, or visions ever could.

In the Biblical descriptions of heaven, we see a common theme:

1. Everyone privileged a glimpse of heaven is overwhelmed and speechless by the dazzling glory of God that permeates it.
2. When the Scriptures tell of someone who was allowed to see the glory and mystery of heaven and future life eternal, usually they did not go around sharing those details with others.
3. The Biblical accounts detailing the future heavenly glory were given to godly men for the specific purpose of writing them down in order to be included in the canon of Scripture.

Would we like to see and experience a bit of heaven on earth? By faith we can, when "we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord" (2 Corinthians 3:18). As an unknown poet once wrote:

Every morning, lean thine arms awhile

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*Upon the windowsill of heaven,
And gaze upon the Lord.
Then, with the vision in thy heart,
Turn strong to meet thy day.*

When we live this way, we have a true story to tell. Not a fantastic story about some “sensational” experience, but the good old Gospel story. Not **a story to bring wealth and fame to us**, but **a story to bring glory to the One** who put this treasure into earthen vessels.

Then when by His grace we reach our eternal destination and see His glory, not as in a glass but face to face, the experience will be indescribable by any earthly language. Our stay will not be temporary, but forevermore. Not as tourists, but as children in our Father’s house.

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