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Q&A: Near-Death Experiences and Life After Death

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Near-Death Experiences and Life After Death:

Question: I am an agnostic who is interested in studying theism. Christianity intrigues me. I like empirical evidence and have some questions regarding near death experiences. Could NDEs result from deceptive spiritual forces to which non-Christians may be susceptible due to the state of their heart? Where do you reference the evidential NDEs to which you refer? Does one of your publications answer these issues?

Answer: Yes, I have co-authored a book with JP Moreland, *Beyond Death* (Wipf & Stock Publishers) with three lengthy chapters on NDEs. I have a partial chapter on your first question. The short answer is that some NDEs definitely indicate what might be called spiritual forces. Basically, I don't think the nature of NDEs helps us construct what kind of world view is true, only that the naturalistic alternative is probably false, since there is very strong evidence here for an afterlife. Still, I think that after they have an experience that is sometimes verifiable, NDErs then basically interpret their these experiences according to their own world view. But if the evidence does strongly indicate an afterlife, naturalism is the "odd man out." The book provides about 20 evidential cases of various sorts, including detailed references. Please let me know what you think about these matters. *Systematic Theology* (Bethany).

Question: Who published your book that talks about near-death experiences? I remember you mentioning that some people experienced NDEs, some of which were of hell-like states. Who went where? Were the people who went to heaven exceptionally good or were the people who went to hell really bad? I just thought it might provide some intriguing insights into who gets into heaven. This is an eternal question!

Answer: Yes, I co-authored a book with J.P. Moreland, entitled *Beyond Death*, published by Wipf and Stock Publishers of Eugene, OR. It has three chapters on NDEs. It is very difficult to answer your question about Christians and non-Christians using only NDEs, since we are dealing with people's personal experiences. Then we have to add their interpretations of these experiences. But we do discuss this question in a good deal of detail on pages 178-183. Christians teach that salvation comes from making a faith commitment to Jesus Christ. As I mentioned in the lectureship on Jesus' resurrection to which you refer, whenever the Gospel facts are defined in the New Testament, the "core" that is always mentioned is the Deity of Jesus Christ, his death for our sins, and his resurrection. This is the factual side. When a person in effect says, "I do" to Jesus, believing this Gospel, they become a Christian, which gives them, among other things, eternal life. I hope this is helpful.

Question: What references would you recommend concerning the evidential value of NDE's? Please send a list.

Answer: Here are a number of items for you to check out:

1. The latest edition of my book with JP Moreland, either the Crossway edition (1998) or the Wipf and Stock reprint (2003), include three chapters on NDEs as opposed to only two chapters in the earlier edition.

2. Negative critiques seldom ever address the evidential aspects of NDEs. For one that at least makes the attempt, see British psychologist Susan Blackmore, *Dying to Live: Near Death Experiences* (Prometheus Books, 1993).
3. I responded to Blackmore, claiming that we do have at least some of the evidence that she required, including a few more Bibliographic items for you: Gary Habermas, "Near Death Experiences and the Evidence: A Review Essay," *Christian Scholar's Review*, 26:1 (Fall, 1996), pp. 78-85.
4. From one of the top medical researchers over the last 25 years: Michael Sabom, *Light & Death: One Doctor's Fascinating account of Near-Death Experiences* (Zondervan, 1998). (You've probably seen his earlier, highly-acclaimed volume, *Recollections of Death: A Medical Investigation* [Harper and Row, 1982].)
5. Sabom also wrote recently a two-part article where he shares some of his conclusions on NDEs: "The Shadow of Death," parts one & two, *Christian Research Journal*, 26:2 (2003) & 26:3 (2003).
6. A critical response (with a creative title) by a University of Washington Medical School professor: *If I Should Wake Before I Die: The Biblical and Medical Truth about Near-Death Experiences* (Crossway, 1997).
7. Although it is a popular account, prominent New Testament scholar Graham Tweltree tells about his own NDE in: *Life after Death* (London: Monarch, 2002), pp. 24-27.
8. Although it is older, I assume you have seen the often-reprinted article by well-known naturalistic philosopher A.J. Ayer, "What I Saw when I was Dead," originally published in the *Sunday Telegraph*, 28 August, 1988.

Question: What sources would be useful in critiquing the doctrine of reincarnation from a biblical perspective?

Answer: I co-authored a book with JP Moreland, entitled *Beyond Death*. It came out with Crossway Books in 1998 & a new version was recently published by Wipf & Stock Publishers. (An older version without all the material is called *Immortality* from Thomas Nelson.) I tell you all this in case you can find a used copy. Anyway, there is a chapter full of critiques of reincarnation. You may find it helpful. Other good books on reincarnation include the following: Norman Geisler and J. Yutaka Amano, *The Reincarnation Sensation* (Tyndale House); Mark Albrecht, *Reincarnation: A Christian Appraisal* (InterVarsity) and John Snyder, *Reincarnation vs. Resurrection* (Moody Press).

Question: The Bible states that we will die, and after that we will be judged. The Bible indicates that hell will be a punishment by fire. Some NDE's also indicate the same. I know that in your book together, J.P. Moreland states that, in the Bible, the descriptions of hell indicate some figurative language, something that I hope is true. But, if so, how does one account for the hellfire NDEs? If hell is figurative, in the sense of emotional suffering for one's rejection of God, like CS Lewis' view, then at the very least, life is completely empty without God. Earlier in my life, I could certainly attest to that truth. But if hell is physical suffering, then physical suffering is added to the emptiness. I absolutely don't want anyone to go through either form of hell. So shouldn't I be telling this to every person I see, praying that they come into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ? But like most people, who wants to be rejected or laughed at? But

wouldn't talking to others be the proper and practical response? This consumes me. Anything help you can provide will be most appreciated.

Answer: I think the verse in Hebrews is a general statement about human beings. People who were raised from the dead in the Bible, like Lazarus, were raised by a direct act of God--a miracle. So there are some *exceptions* to the statement in Hebrews. The hellfire NDEs consists of people's reports and experiences. They still could be correct in their reporting, but it's just very difficult to know for sure. According to both views, hell is a literal place of punishment without God for eternity. So you are definitely right to want to tell others. And I, too, share with you the difficulty of not liking to start religious conversations unless I am asked first. So, lately I've been trying to think a lot about how I'd tell someone if my favorite football team won the Super Bowl, or if I caught a large bass. I'd be so excited that I wouldn't care who heard me. So especially if the persons are my loved ones and friends, why wouldn't I want them to hear the greatest news in the world?

For some really neat ideas about how to witness naturally by using some very innovative cards and things, see www.livingwaters.com.

Question: Can the intermediate state be compared to the traditional doctrine of Purgatory? It seems from what I have read that it cannot. What do you think?

Answer: You are right that the intermediate state is certainly not like the traditional Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory. This is especially so because of the suffering or purifying aspects that many envisage. An interesting comment was made by my friend, Peter Kreeft, a Roman Catholic philosopher. He differs from the majority of Roman Catholics and says that purgatory isn't about suffering, so he call it "God's kindergarten" or stage one of eternity (Everything You Ever Wanted to Know about Heaven, Harper and Row, pp. 21-22). That particular comment is closer to the Protestant view.

Question: Can you provide any good reference works on the intermediate state? Can you recommend one of your writings?

Answer: Regarding the intermediate state, I'm not sure how much I can say briefly. You may have noticed that very little is published on the subject. Probably the chief text is 2 Cor 5:1-11. In Beyond Death, my co-author, J.P. Moreland, has a good chapter on the subject. The book is published by Wipf and Stock Publishers of Eugene, OR.

Question: When family members have passed away will they again be joined in heaven? Will husband and wife know one another and perhaps even live in eternity together?

Answer: I think there is no question from Scripture that we will know our loved ones in heaven (Matthew 8:11; 1 Corinthians 13:12, both in context). I think it is also very important that the disciples knew Jesus, even in his resurrected body. I am not sure, however, what will be the precise relation between husbands and wives in heaven. But it makes sense that such relationships will be very special.

Question: Does some part of our being live on in another place once the brain ceases in this physical world? What about brain injuries?

Answer: On my view, the abilities of our spirits in this life are sometimes limited by brain/body problems. Perhaps a helpful analogy is this: picture a very healthy man who is trapped in a house. Although he is fine, he is limited in his knowledge of the outside world by what he can see through the windows. However, all but one of the windows is blocked and the only other one is mostly blocked. Although he is well, he is very much limited by the conditions of the house. I think this is somewhat like the soul, in that it, too, is fine, but is limited by what actually happens to its body. After death, the spirit lives separately from the body, until it is given a new, resurrected body.

No, the brain does not die with the body. What is the evidence for these things? One of my primary responses comes from my 30 year study of near-death cases. I have found almost 100 cases that are accompanied by evidence--some so impressive that it has been written up in secular medical journals. For example, some cases involve people reporting verifiable things that happened a distance away, but after they were pronounced dead and lying where they couldn't see these things physically. Others have correctly described a variety of things even while they had no heart beat, no brain waves, etc. This tells me that people seem to live even while their bodies are "dead" and that sometimes they are capable of observing things even while their bodies are incapacitated.