

Near Death Experiences

*An Evaluation from the Theological Perspective of
The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod
June 2015*

History, Beliefs, Practices

Identity:

Near death experiences (NDEs) are psychological events, at times involving mystical or religious insights, reportedly experienced by some individuals who are declared dead, close to death, or involved in an extreme physical or emotional crisis.

Founder:

None

Statistics:

According to the results of a 1992 Gallup poll, about 5% of the adult population of the United States has experienced an NDE.¹

History:

Psychologist Raymond Moody coined the term “near death experience” in his 1975 book, *Life after Life*. His book sparked interest in the subject and the formation of an association for the study of NDEs. In his book, Moody studied 50 NDE reports, many of which included a description of leaving one’s body, a journey through a tunnel, and meeting a “being” of light. Other books followed, including *Life at Death* (Kenneth Ring, 1980), *Recollections of Death* (Michael Sabom, 1982), *Closer to the Light* (Melvin Morse, 1990, a study of the NDEs of children), *Embraced by the Light* (Betty Eadie, 1992), and *Saved by the Light* (Dannion Brinkley, 1994).

Interest in NDEs continues to grow due to many popular accounts, including *Heaven Is for Real: A Little Boy’s Astounding Story of His Trip to Heaven and Back* (Todd Burpo, 2010), *To Heaven and Back: A Doctor’s Extraordinary Account of Her Death, Heaven, Angels, and Life Again* (Mary Neal, 2012), and *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon’s Journey into the Afterlife* (Eben Alexander, 2012). The title of a magazine article reflects the popularity of these accounts: “Publishers in 7th heaven with near-death memoirs.”² Although such titles remain popular with readers, in 2015 LifeWay Christian Resources stopped selling “experiential testimonies about heaven” after the Southern Baptist Convention adopted a resolution in 2014 on “the sufficiency of Scripture regarding the afterlife.”³

¹ http://www.nderf.org/NDERF/Research/number_nde_usa.htm

² Craig Wilson, “Publishers in 7th heaven with near-death memoirs,” *Christian Century* (March 20, 2013), 19.

³ David, Roach, “Heaven Tourism Books Pulled from Nearly 200 Christian Bookstores,” March 25, 2015. The Southern Baptist Resolution affirmed “the sufficiency of biblical revelation over subjective experiential explanations to guide one’s understanding of the truth about heaven and hell.”

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2015/march/heaven-tourism-books-pulled-lifeway-90-minutes-in-heaven.html>.

Texts:

Raymond Moody's book, *Life after Life*, was an important—if not founding—text.

Beliefs and Practices:

While near death experiences may be difficult to explain, some researchers believe that NDEs are hallucinations produced by the stress of surgery or by drugs. Another study suggests that the NDE is the response of a brain recovering from injury or surgery. The experience ends as conscious awareness returns: “[T]he brain is capable of manufacturing illusory states of a supposedly other-worldly realm, generated and acutely *remembered* and *recalled* over a very *short* measured time-frame.”⁴ The same study notes “that two or more experiences undergone by the same person are rarely identical ... Note, thus again, the multiple inconsistencies, as with reports of Heaven and descriptions of Jesus.”⁵ One researcher comments that half of reported NDEs are “hellish” rather than positive.⁶ The NDE is unique to the individual's culture and religion. Christians may meet Jesus; Hindus might see the god Vishnu.⁷ Colton Burpo, whose experience is described in the book and major motion picture, *Heaven Is for Real*, saw Jesus on a throne at God's right hand, with Gabriel enthroned on the left. In *Saved by the Light*, Dannon Brinkley writes that he received counsel from 13 shining beings.

The religious insights received in NDEs vary widely. In *Proof of Heaven*, neurosurgeon Eben Alexander described the message he received in his NDE: “You are loved and cherished, dearly, forever. You have nothing to fear. There is nothing you can do wrong.”⁸ Alexander reported: “The universe as I experienced it in my coma is—I have come to see with both shock and joy—the same one that both Einstein and Jesus were speaking of in their (very) different ways.”⁹ The insight at the heart of Alexander's journey was “that we are loved and accepted unconditionally by a God even more grand and unfathomably glorious than the one I'd learned of as a child in Sunday school.”¹⁰ Betty Eadie, author of *Embraced by the Light*, learned in her NDE that humans are not sinful by nature and she should not regret past deeds. Eadie (a Mormon) and Dannon Brinkley (author of *Saved by the Light* and not a church member) “both claim to have met ultimate reality face-to-face without the assistance of any religious institution, human mediation, or historical connection.”¹¹ Brinkley reported that shining beings told him to construct New Age centers for the dying to help them recognize their own divinity, telling him, “When you reach the point where you can control this energy and transform it into a positive force, you have found the part of you that is God.”¹²

⁴ Michael N. March, “The Phenomenology of the Near-Death Experience (NDE): An Encounter with Eternity—or Simply an Aberrant Brain-State,” *Modern Believing* 52:2 (April 2011), 40 (italics in the original).

⁵ March, 42.

⁶ John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *The Facts on Life After Death* (Eugene OR: Harvest House, 1992), 9.

⁷ Mark Galli, “Incredible Journeys: What to Make of Visits to Heaven” *Christianity Today* (December 2012) at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2012/december/incredible-journeys.html>.

⁸ Eben Alexander, “Heaven is Real: A Doctor's Experience with the Afterlife,” at

<http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2012/10/07/proof-of-heaven-a-doctor-s-experience-with-the-afterlife.html>.

⁹ Alexander, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2012/10/07/proof-of-heaven-a-doctor-s-experience-with-the-afterlife.html>.

¹⁰ Alexander, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2012/10/07/proof-of-heaven-a-doctor-s-experience-with-the-afterlife.html>.

¹¹ Douglas Groothuis, “To Heaven and Back?” *Christianity Today* (April 3, 1995), 41.

¹² John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *The Facts on Near-Death Experiences* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1996), 21-22.

Individuals who have positive NDEs often lose any fear of divine judgment. They do not speak of sin or the need for salvation, although their experiences may leave them with a desire to live better, more caring lives. After an NDE one person said, “I now have a very strong view that church and religion are totally divorced from spirituality. It doesn’t matter what sort of religion you get involved with ... I do believe in God but not in a traditional church God. I mean I believe that all that light [in the NDE] is what we call God.”¹³ Such a response, one writer suggests, reflects an “American religious tendency: immediate individual spirituality.”¹⁴

Some people look to NDE reports for hope and confidence: “There’s got to be an element of hope here ... We want to hear from someone who has gone there, done that, seen it. That there is something beyond this life, which is miserable, even for those of us who are happy.”¹⁵ In uncertain times, “people look for comfort...The concept that people have seen ‘what’s next’ and shared what it’s like gives hope and a feeling that life on earth is part of a journey with a greater reward”¹⁶ Eben Alexander said after his NDE: “I want to affirm again—not just to my fellow scientists but to everyone—that there is a larger, *more* real world out there. Those who have experienced it are neither deluded nor dishonest, but they *are* hampered by the limits of language to convey the sheer exponential vastness of what they encountered. This world of consciousness beyond the body is the true new frontier, not just of science but of humankind itself, and it is my profound hope that what happened to me will bring the world one step closer to accepting it.”¹⁷

A Lutheran Response:

Suffering yet faithful, Job asks, “If a man dies, shall he live again?” (Job 14:14). People who have NDEs—or those who place their confidence in such reports—offer various answers to that question, imagining “the most curious things concerning conditions in the life to come. But here, too, we confine ourselves to what the Scriptures say.”¹⁸ Scripture clearly teaches that upon death believers enter the presence of God. When we fall asleep in Christ we will be at home with the Lord: “We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:6-8; see also Luke 23:42-43; Phil. 1:23; Heb. 9:27).

Although Scripture “speaks of eternal life in many places, it does not supply us with many details regarding its exalted nature. This method of teaching the Holy Spirit has chosen designedly; for in this life we have no adequate conception of the nature of things that lie beyond space and time.”¹⁹ Unlike many who report the unusual events of their NDEs, the inspired authors of Scripture were not always permitted to describe their heavenly visions. The apostle Paul wrote of a man (likely the apostle himself) who “was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter” (2 Cor. 12:3-4). The apostle John described by inspiration what he saw upon entering “a door standing open in heaven” (Rev. 4:1). However, at one point, John was told, “Seal up what the seven thunders have said, and do not write it down” (Rev. 10:4). Our knowledge of “the life of the world to come”²⁰ is limited: “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but

¹³ Ankerberg, *The Facts on Near-Death Experiences*, 20.

¹⁴ Groothuis, 41.

¹⁵ Wilson, 19.

¹⁶ Wilson, 19.

¹⁷ Alexander, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2012/10/07/proof-of-heaven-a-doctor-s-experience-with-the-afterlife.html>.

¹⁸ Edward W. A. Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine* (St. Louis: CPH, 2006), 421.

¹⁹ John Theodore Mueller, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: CPH, 1951), 642.

²⁰ The Nicene Creed, *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: CPH, 2006), 158.

then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known” (1 Cor. 13:12).

In *Embraced by the Light*, Betty Eadie wrote of her return to her body: “The body’s cumbersome weight and coldness were abhorrent ... I became inconsolably depressed. After the joy of spiritual freedom, I had become a prisoner to the flesh again.”²¹ While we certainly struggle against the temptations of our sinful flesh (Rom. 7:14-25; Mark 14:38) and endure suffering in this life (John 16:33), our bodies are God’s creation, made in His image: “Human beings properly understood are comprised of bodies and souls, knit together. Death, no original part of God’s plan, tears us apart ... We are not essentially ‘souls.’ When our bodies die, that’s not God’s plan, and He’s going to change it.”²² Job spoke with confidence of that day of change, the day of his bodily resurrection: “For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another” (Job 19:25-27).

Many NDE reports describe a welcoming and often unnamed “being” of light. Such claims should be regarded with caution because we know that “even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light” (2 Cor. 11:14). Those who experience an NDE may come away from the encounter desiring to live a better life and believing that they cannot be condemned for their sins. Scripture tells us, however, that “the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 6:23). Those who put their faith in NDE reports long for hope concerning life after death, hope from “someone who has gone there, done that, seen it.”²³ As Christians, we know that salvation is not found in human efforts or in an unnamed being of light. We have a living hope in our Savior Jesus Christ, who was not merely “near death,” but who died and was buried and raised bodily to life on the third day—raised as we, through faith in his name, will on the Last Day be raised up from our graves (1 Cor. 15: 20-23; 1 John 3:2). Our knowledge of life in God’s presence, however limited it may be for now, does not depend on NDE reports but on the Word of our risen and reigning Lord: “Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades” (Rev. 1:17-18).

For Further Reading:

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 Hille, Kirk. *Heaven or Hell: A Future Residence Guide*. St. Louis: CPH, 2006.
 Leach, LeRoy. *Lifelight: Heaven and Hell Study Guide*. St. Louis: CPH, 2012.
 Loy, David. *Lifelight: Heaven and Hell Leader’s Guide*. St. Louis: CPH, 2012.

Links and Websites

Gibbs, Jeffrey. “Heaven Is For Real.” May 23, 2011. <http://concordiatheology.org/2011/05/heaven-is-for-real>

²¹ Ankerberg, *The Facts on Near-Death Experiences*, 14-15.

²² Jeffrey A. Gibbs, “Regaining Biblical Hope: Restoring the Prominence of the Parousia,” *Concordia Journal* (October 2001): 316.

²³ Wilson, 19.