



Wise as serpents and harmless as doves

(Matthew 10:16)

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Getting high on heaven: the argument from near-death experience

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When last did you make that trip to heaven? You didn't? It is quite understandable if you feel left out. Trips to heaven are quite the rage considering the spate of books coming out on the subject. There is *Heaven is for Real*, *The Boy Who Came Back from Heaven* and *90 Minutes in Heaven* to name just a few. The first sold 7 million copies. It tells of the near-death experience of the then four-year-old Colton Burpo. This is what the General Superintendent of the Wesleyan Church had to say about it, "Colton's story could have been in the New Testament-but God has chosen to speak to us in this twenty-first century through the unblemished eyes of a child, revealing some of the mysteries of heaven. The writing is compelling and the truth astonishing, creating a hunger for more."¹

What is the thinking Christian to make of all this?

There are two main messages. I've experienced heaven and you need to know about it.

"You need to know about my trip to heaven"

Let's deal with the second first. Assuming for the sake of argument, that these kids have been to heaven, do we really need to know about it?

It is striking that those who at best have only had a few minutes of heaven have inspired entire books about the subject whereas Jesus, the real expert (he said, "No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven--the

Son of Man"² said so little. Perhaps God wants to inform us about heaven on a strictly need to know basis? He certainly forbade the Apostle Paul from speaking about paradise.³

It has been argued the stories of near-death experience reassure people in their faith. But why would I need my faith reassured by a kid, when it is amply assured by Jesus? Three days in the tomb made sure that Jesus was really dead. Many hundreds seeing him alive after his death made sure that he really rose from the dead as had been prophesied.⁴ Surely knowing this Jesus is enough. Here is the chief problem with the near-death stories. While they may say positive things about Jesus, it comes with the message, "but you need something more than him." At best they deflect attention away from the sufficiency of Christ.

Near-death purveyors presume that if you want to be at peace or upbeat, you cannot do better than an encounter with heaven. But Judas and others who refused to believe were left stone cold even from extended encounters with God incarnate. Perhaps a believer encountering the Glorified Christ would do the trick? Well that happened to the Apostle John. Even *this* disciple, whom Jesus loved, "fell at his feet as though dead".⁵ John desperately needed reassurance not *through* an encounter with the Glorified Christ, but *because* of it. No wonder when his "eyes were like blazing fire" and his face "like the sun shining in all its brilliance."

How does Jesus reassure John? He reminded him of the Gospel and of who Jesus is. He says, "Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades."⁶ Jesus did not tell John anything he didn't know before. John just needed to remember and believe. All we need to face death and God has already been given to us. Seeking assurances from the words of children is clutching at straws and is exactly the wrong message for Christians to send to the world. What the world needs is Christians who clutch the Cross.

"I have experienced heaven"

Since the average Christian has never been to heaven, how can we possibly evaluate the claims of those who claim they have? Is this not presumptuous? But we do have a yardstick. Jesus.

Take the following exchange between Colton and his father.

"Colton, which side of God's throne was Jesus sitting on?" I asked.

Colton climbed up on the bed and faced me on his knees. "Well, pretend like you're in God's throne. Jesus sat right there," he said, pointing to my right side ... Wow. Here was a rare case where I had tested Colton's memories against what the Bible says, and he passed without batting an eye. But now I had another question, one I didn't know the answer to, at least not an answer from the Bible.

"Well, who sits on the other side of God's throne?" I said.

"Oh, that's easy, Dad. That's where the angel Gabriel is. He's really nice."⁷

According to Scripture Gabriel is merely an angel.⁸ If you are going to put an angel on God's left hand side should it not be the *archangel* Michael?⁹ But if anyone should be on the left, it should be the third member of the Trinity!

Consider what Jesus says. "... to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father."¹⁰ How can the Father be preparing a place for Jesus' left side when God the Father should be there? Remember that the writer to the Hebrews says, "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."¹¹ We can avoid getting into a tizzy about who sits where by remembering something else Jesus said, "God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth."¹² Since God is spirit, he does not have a left and right hand side. Nor does he need a throne to sit on. The writer to the Hebrews is simply affirming the high position of Jesus.

It is understandable that Colton does not understand metaphor. It is his pastor father that should know better. Instead of hanging onto his son's words, he should have smiled to himself and in time gently explained to Colton the nature of God. What is extraordinary is not the vivid imagination of children (Colton says Jesus rode a rainbow-coloured horse and people had wings and halos), but the naivety of the parents that would believe them. One even says to his son, "You are my hero and the person I most want to be like when I grow up!"¹³

The place of experience

We need not assume Colton and company are lying. Scientific research is revealing that the brain becomes flooded with natural chemicals during a near-

death experience. The effect is similar to a drug trip and explains why the experience is so vivid. Astute reader that you are, you will notice that the argument from near-death experience is a particular case of the argument from personal experience and is a fallacy. It proves nothing either way. Saver and Rabin, writing in the *Journal of Neuropsychiatry* explain, "Religious experience is brain-based. This should be taken as an unexceptional claim. All human experience is brain-based, including scientific reasoning, mathematical deduction, moral judgment, and artistic creation, as well as religious states of mind. Determining the neural substrates of any of these states does not automatically lessen or demean their spiritual significance. The external reality of religious percepts is *neither confirmed nor disconfirmed* by establishing brain correlates of religious experience."¹⁴ [italics mine]

So, brain-based religious experience proves nothing. All experience is brain-based. It may or may not be grounded in reality. If there is a lion charging towards me, it is my brain that causes my perception of it. The lion also plays a role - a vital role. My experience is grounded in the reality of the lion. If the lion is pink then my experience is merely brain-based and not grounded in reality. Experience does not determine external reality. External reality may or may not determine experience. This is true for all kinds of experience including spiritual experience.

Rather than contemplating someone's few minutes of near-death experience, we are better off contemplating the One who had a three-day real-death experience. Why did Jesus say nothing about his three days of real death? It is because Christians are called to put their faith in a Person, not an experience. Experience is untrustworthy. From an experiential point of view, Good Friday was Bleak Friday. Very Bleak. Apparently this One was being destroyed along with all he stood for. The disciples were, to a man, downcast and dejected. From a biblical point of view that Friday is the centre-point of history. While men were executing Jesus, the Father was executing justice and redemption. While men were broadcasting their evil nature, God was broadcasting his nature - his holiness, mercy, love and wisdom. It has been said that those with an argument are at the mercy of those with an experience. But those grounded in the Christ, dead and risen, are at the mercy of no-one.

It is human and quite natural to seek reassurance in facing one's Maker. Even the Apostle John needed as much. Where is the best place to go for that? Not a heavenly trip, but to remember that the Lion of Judah is also the Lamb of God. Christians already have everything they need in Christ alone.

Editor: Andy D Potts

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Notes

¹ Burpo (2010) *Heaven is for Real: A Little Boy's Astounding Story of His Trip to Heaven and Back*. Thomas Nelson, Nashville, Tennessee, dust jacket.

² John 3:13.

³ 2 Corinthians 12:4.

⁴ 1 Corinthians 15:6, Psalm 16:8-10 cf. Acts 2:25-28.

⁵ Revelation 1:17.

⁶ Revelation 1:17-18.

⁷ Burpo (2010) *Heaven is for Real: A Little Boy's Astounding Story of His Trip to Heaven and Back*. Thomas Nelson, Nashville, Tennessee, p. 101.

⁸ Luke 1:19.

⁹ Jude 1:9.

¹⁰ Matthew 20:23.

¹¹ Hebrews 12:2.

¹² John 4:24.

¹³ Malarkey (2004) *The Boy Who Came Back from Heaven: A Remarkable Account of Miracles, Angels, and Life Beyond This World*. Tyndale House Publishers, Carol Stream, Illinois, p. viii.

¹⁴ Saver, J.L. and J. Rabin (1997) The Neural Substrates of Religious Experience. *The Journal of Neuropsychiatry* 9 (3):498-510.