

Questions From This Side

Considering he had died the previous week, I'll admit that talking with my father was a bit strange. But there he was, conversing with me in a dream that to this day seems far more than that.

Daddy appeared too real, his words too precise and prophetic, and our surroundings too divine for just another night vision that I could later blame on pizza, false hope or even my still-raw grief of losing him to a sudden heart attack. Upon waking, I was convinced I'd just experienced a touch from heaven.

Still, over the next few weeks I wrestled with the reality of my encounter, fully aware that Scripture rarely puts interaction with the deceased in a positive light. The Old Testament presents no fewer than six specific warnings against consulting the dead (see Deut. 18:10-13), while the New Testament clearly speaks of the Holy Spirit as the lone source of truth amid the spirits and demonic forces that dwell in this world.

I didn't consult with a medium and had no intention of connecting with anything associated with the afterlife. But did this somehow legitimize my experience, or had I "defiled" myself by talking to a dead man—albeit subconsciously (Lev. 19:31)? What was I to make of my all-too-vivid encounter with my dad? Had my visit with him truly given me a glimpse of heaven?

I don't have definitive answers for these or other related questions. Like millions of others who have had similar encounters with deceased loved ones, I struggle with the fact that my experience doesn't fit nicely into a neat little theological box within my faith grid.

That seems to be a common theme when it comes to dealing with heaven and hell. Questions abound, while experience both complicates and confirms. How can something so universally accepted as the afterlife remain so misunderstood?

For that reason, this issue of *Charisma* combines questions and personal experience to give you a deeper sense of what heaven and hell are like. The Bible is explicit on some things regarding the afterlife. Bible teachers Perry Stone (p. 36) and Bill Wiese (p. 44) point this out as they use Scripture to answer some of the most commonly asked questions about heaven and hell.

Yet there's also a reason people around the world throughout history have been fascinated with stories of heaven and hell. We seem to have an innate sense of wonder when it comes to visualizing what comes after our life on Earth. This month we've let Richard Sigmund, Lonnie Honeycutt, Choo Thomas and a few others offer their wondrous descriptions of heaven, based on what they claim were personal visits to God's abode. Just as real, yet on the other extreme, is the harrowing account of Wiese, whose 23-minute journey to hell has left a permanent impression not only on his soul, but millions of others' as well.

Given their importance in the scope of life, heaven and hell get a ridiculously small amount of airtime today. And for all the buzz surrounding the afterlife these days, you'd think we might have more understanding of humanity's end destinations. I hope this issue changes that.

CONTRIBUTING TO THIS ISSUE ...

In 1979, **Ron Phillips** was called as pastor of Central Baptist Church in the Chattanooga, Tenn., area, where he serves today. An avid knife collector, he once wrote a book on parenting but burned every copy after having children.

As a teenager, former real estate broker **Bill Wiese** (pictured with wife Annette) was attacked by a 9-foot tiger shark off the Florida coast while surfing. As scary as that sounds, it still pales in comparison to his 23-minute adventure in hell.

Valerie G. Lowe is an award-winning journalist who got her start in media doing a kid's show on TV in the sixth grade. She's an identical twin, a fan of CBS' *The Good Wife* and enjoys shopping at vintage thrift stores.

After writing this month's cover story about people's fascination with heaven, freelance writer **Ken Walker** is looking forward to a reunion there with his second-oldest stepdaughter, who died of a heart attack in 2005.