

Heavenly Minded

Why we're fascinated with stories from heaven

Richard Sigmund's description of his eight-hour visit to heaven is a sensual extravaganza. After a serious, single-vehicle accident, he suddenly walked through a glory cloud, smelled a sweet aroma and tasted a sensation like strawberries and cream.

Walking on a 6-foot-wide golden path accompanied by two angels, he looked out at the richest green grass he had ever seen. Massive banks of flowers adorned the scene and included roses 4 feet wide.

In a park he observed a surfeit of benches, some made of solid gold. Trees standing 2,000 feet high dotted the landscape. One stunning timber appeared to measure miles across, with leaves shaped like teardrops, similar to crystals on chandeliers.

He saw other delights: four rivers feeding the throne of God, great universities with buildings 1 to 2 miles square, people constructing houses, warrior angels 20 feet tall.

Sigmund also reported encountering such historical figures as Johann Sebastian Bach, Smith Wigglesworth and William Branham.

"I guarantee you, I remember the experience," says Sigmund, a charismatic evangelist who used to volunteer at Oral Roberts' and Kathryn Kuhlman's meetings. "I know dozens of other people who have had similar experiences—people who had experiences with God or have seen heaven."

Released recently by Whitaker House, Sigmund's *My Time in Heaven* is an expanded version of a 1994 book published by a different company. It contains one of the most detailed accounts of the eternal realm, but it is not alone in the annals of first-person experiences about heaven.

Among the numerous other books is *Heaven Is Empty, Hell Is Full*, published two weeks after Sigmund's. In it, author Asfaw Berhane—a counselor with the Trinity Broadcasting Network—discusses supernatural encounters with Christ, including his four visits to heaven. Some other titles include:

- ***Death, Heaven and Back*** by Lonnie Honeycutt. Released last year by Honeycutt, a charismatic pastor, this details his trip to heaven in 2008 after he died in the hospital during a battle with throat cancer. He tells of being bathed in a light so bright he almost glowed, meeting the mother-in-law he never knew while she was alive, and seeing legions of angels flying overhead. "I was told I was dead for four or five hours," says the minister of pastoral care at Deeper Life Fellowship in Mobile, Ala. "I have no clue, really. Time in heaven meant nothing to me."
- ***90 Minutes in Heaven*** by Don Piper. After more than five years on the market, Piper's popular book shows no signs of losing its appeal. More than 4.5 million copies are in print. Pronounced dead at the scene of an accident in 1989, the Southern Baptist minister tells of meeting childhood friends who died in accidents and his great-grandparents, and seeing dazzling sights: "Everything I experienced was like a first-class buffet for the senses." Piper's book gathers an endorsement from ministry leader and author Randy Alcorn, whose biblically based expositions on heaven have been popular among charismatics and Pentecostals. "I'm certainly convinced he is not at all lying or exaggerating," says Alcorn, who joined Piper recently at a panel discussion on heaven. "When I read his book, I didn't see anything in it that contradicted the biblical revelation."
- ***Caught Up Into Heaven*** by Marietta Davis. She penned this

account, one of the first written, after falling into a nine-day trance in the summer of 1848. Her story also appeared in *Scenes Beyond the Grave* by J.L. Scott (1859), which was updated by Dennis and Nolene Prince in 2006 and titled *Nine Days in Heaven*. Davis tells of seeing dazzling light and talking to an angel who explained that when people die, they are taken to the place where they will spend the rest of eternity.

- ***Divine Revelations of Heaven*** by Mary K. Baxter. This is another title popular among charismatics. It is based on a series of visions that she says God gave her in 1976 immediately after showing her the horrors of hell. Baxter says she was being accompanied by an angel and saw two others standing at the gate, one of whom retrieved a book that had her name stamped on its gold cover. After opening the book, the angels admitted her. "I was totally enraptured by the glory of heaven," Baxter says. "Heaven is a reality. It is one thing to try to describe the wonders of this city; it is quite another to know that you will share the joy of it."

Divinely Popular

Even science, the typically rational antagonist of faith, is being included in the discussion. Christian apologist Dinesh D'Souza argued in his book *Life After Death*, released last fall, that an afterlife is a probable occurrence based on scientific evidence, not just religious belief.

These assorted book releases reflect what Pentecostal theologians and other Bible teachers see as a growing trend: Heaven is popular. Between 70 percent and 90 percent of the public believe in it, polls in recent years have shown.

Some observers attribute this rising interest to a parallel, renewed curiosity about the end times. James Bradford, general

secretary of the Assemblies of God, typically hears more speculation about the Antichrist or future events in the Middle East than the afterlife. People tend to ask him about heaven when they have a death in the family.

“Eschatology issues and heaven are linked,” says the former pastor. “Sometimes people ask, ‘What’s this all about?’ I tell them to be in the presence of God is heaven.”

Oral Roberts University theology professor Jeffrey Lamp says heaven has always held the interest of charismatics and Pentecostals because of their focus on other-worldly topics. A fascination with life after death among the general public spills over into the church as well, he notes. He sees a renewed fascination with the end times as being linked to the interest in heaven.

“They’re all generally concerned with eschatology—what happens in the last analysis—and that has kind of cosmic dimensions,” Lamp says. “[The questions being asked are] what happens to reality in the end, but also what happens to individuals?”

Alcorn says this resurgence is needed, since Bible colleges, seminaries and churches fail to teach enough about our eternal destiny. He attributes this lack of emphasis to faulty interpretations, which he too has followed in the past, he admits. Much of the teaching fails to distinguish between heaven—where Christians currently go—and the new Earth, or new Jerusalem, pictured in Revelation 21-22, which follows Christ’s triumphant return, he says.

A belief that we will return to glorified bodies for eternity is crucial to viewing heaven as a restored Earth, where the physical realm isn’t evil, Alcorn says. Accepting this thinking about the resurrection means banishing the belief that eternity will be spent floating in the clouds, plucking harps. That concept is a primary reason many Christians lack an excitement about heaven, he says.

“That means I can look at this life and say that eternal life doesn’t mean the elimination of enjoying the beauty of trees, flowers, animals and meaningful relationships; being creative—the arts, drama and literature. These things are part of the way God made us. That’s what He intended the world to be,” Alcorn explains.

Indeed, boring depictions of heaven over 2,000 years of Christian pictography are one of the things atheists rebel against, says D’Souza—who has debated such noted skeptics as Christopher Hitchens and Peter Singer.

“Heaven is portrayed as a motionless place with angels and perpetual worship and humans in a kind of divine choir,” he says. “Everyone is bathed in a sort of glow, but nothing seems to happen. Ironically, it’s the Christian portrayal of heaven that has caused a lot of people not to want to go there.”

Stay Focused

Though an interest in heaven may be on the rise, many Christians draw the line at supposed visits by those who are alive in heaven. Over the years, the crop of books on heaven has drawn skepticism and criticism from those who say the personal claims fail to line up with the biblical narrative.

Lamp offers a caution about any account: Don’t get too carried away with the details. Although ones he has read generally reflect John’s vision of new Jerusalem, he thinks people tend to take these images far too literally and miss the Bible’s symbolic significance.

He also says paying too much attention to heavenly images can become a form of escapism and a way of overlooking earthly obligations.

“What tends to happen is, people look at it and think: *Won’t it be great when I get to heaven? Look at all the cool*

benefits that await me," Lamp says. "I think the real focus of [the book of] Revelation is on God's triumph and what that means for us, not just in terms of future benefits, but also a concern for what that means for the present time."

Alcorn, who liked Piper's book, warns against accepting the ideas of other authors if their work conflicts with Scripture. In his extensive research, the president of Eternal Perspective Ministries has read books that tell of encountering an angel of light who reassures the author that all is well, even with those who don't believe in Christ.

"That's a half-truth," Alcorn says. "God does love everyone, but to come back [and] tell people, 'All is well; you don't have to change,' is very different than, 'Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand.'"

He adds: "Whenever someone comes with a message that people don't need to be spiritually transformed or born again, I would say that Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. That may well have been Satan."

Bible teacher Anne Graham Lotz says questions about heaven and debates over whether biblical language is literal or figurative can obscure a key reality: Heaven is real.

She notes that the apostle John, the same disciple who said he witnessed Jesus walking on water, feeding the 5,000 and raising Lazarus, also said he saw heaven (see Rev. 21). Jesus Himself, she adds, said He was going to prepare a place for His followers.

"There is a place being prepared for us," says Lotz, author of *Heaven: My Father's House*. "It's an actual, literal, physical place. That gives us hope as we look at our world around us, which seems to be unraveling in so many ways, whether it's nationally, internationally, politically or environmentally."

Lotz hopes more Christians will probe the subject of heaven by studying the Bible and seeking to understand it for themselves.

“It’s broader than just needing a new vision of heaven,” she says of the cartoonish images that tend to dominate concepts of heaven. “I think we need a renewed commitment to the Bible—to read it, study it, understand it and live by it.”

Sigmund agrees, saying as marvelous as heaven is, he is more concerned that people accept Christ so they can enter heaven when they die.

“It took a long time to write the book,” he says of the 20-year lapse between his accident and his original volume. “I didn’t think anybody would believe me. But if nobody believes me, I’m still obeying God. People who don’t want you to talk about it usually want to deny there is a heaven.”

Ken Walker, a freelance writer based in Huntington, ., is looking forward to a reunion in heaven with his second-oldest stepdaughter, who died of a heart attack in 2005.

Watch testimonies from people who say they have died and gone to heaven at