

Proof of Heaven: A Review.
By Donald S. Whitney

Eben Alexander III, *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon's Journey Into the Afterlife* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012), 208 pages.

Early on November 10, 2008, Eben Alexander became comatose after several hours of progressively severe headache and back pain that had intensified into massive seizures. Tests revealed that the Lynchburg, Virginia neurosurgeon had mysteriously contracted an extremely rare (i.e., one in ten million annual occurrence) bacterial meningitis-encephalitis. For six days he languished in the coma, his body unresponsive to the increasingly massive doses of antibiotics and other medications. At this stage the mortality rate for those in Alexander's condition is 97%, and the few who do survive remain in a persistently vegetative state.

Then, on the seventh day, within minutes after the lead doctor in the case had asked the family to consider taking Alexander off the ventilator, his eyes popped open. Soon he would say that during the last seven days he had been in heaven.

Near-death experiences

It is not difficult to become fascinated by reports of near-death experiences (NDEs). We all know we will die and NDEs promise to give us glimpses into what awaits us after death. The first popularization of this phenomenon came with the 1975 bestseller, *Life After Life* by Raymond A. Moody, M.D., Ph.D. Several others have followed, including best-selling titles in recent years such as *90 Minutes in Heaven* by Don Piper (2005), *Heaven Is for Real* by Todd Burpo (2010), and *To Heaven and Back* by Mary Neal, M.D. (2012). But Moody remains the grandfather of the genre as well as the most ardent student of and articulate spokesman for near-death experiences, a term he himself coined. And it is no less than Raymond Moody who said about the NDE described in *Proof of Heaven*, "Dr. Eben Alexander's near death experience is the most astounding I have heard in more than four decades of studying this phenomenon. [It is] one of the crown jewels of all near death experiences. . . . Dr. Alexander is living proof of an afterlife."¹

Indeed, this particular NDE is a fascinating story on many levels. The extremely unusual nature of his medical case, the drama of the family's experiences and interactions during Alexander's coma, and of course, the primary attraction of the book, namely the story of Alexander's experiences while in a coma, all make *Proof of Heaven* a book that is hard to put down. Alexander basically alternates chapters between those that recount the events that occur on the earthly side of things with the chapters wherein he describes his out-of-the-body experience. The most surprising part of the book is how effectively Alexander pieces together the parts of the narrative seen through the eyes of his family, friends, and the medical personnel involved during the time he is comatose.

Alexander's trip to heaven

After twenty-nine pages, Alexander finally gets to the real story, to the reason people buy the book, that is, the description of the experience he maintains was an escorted trip to heaven, to the very presence of God Himself. It begins with the discovery of himself in what he would come to describe as the "Realm of the Earthworm's-Eye View." It is a place of darkness, with something like glowing, dark red roots or blood vessels stretching from far above to far below. The sound of a dull pounding somewhere in the distance and the smell of a foul, deathlike odor eventually began to displease him. Grotesque animal faces would appear and groan or screech; reptilian, wormlike creatures would slither past. How long was he there? "Months? Years? Eternity?" (31). Time did not exist in this place.

Then something appeared above Alexander in the darkness. He would later refer to this as the "Spinning Melody and the Gateway." A spinning light descended, radiating filaments of white-gold light.

¹ Raymond Moody, M.D., Ph.D. Available www.LifeBeyondDeath.net. Accessed November 6, 2012.

Then he began to hear a sound, “a *living* sound, like the richest, most complex, most beautiful piece of music you’ve ever heard” (38). At the center was an opening through which he was transported in a flash to “a completely new world. The strangest, most beautiful world I’d ever seen. Brilliant, vibrant, ecstatic, stunning. . . . I could heap on one adjective after another to describe what this world looked like and felt like, but they’d all fall short” (38).

He found himself flying over the earth, but the earth had been transformed into a new world. It was green and lush with trees, fields, streams, and waterfalls. Children played and laughed; adults sang and danced in circles. They wore simple, but beautiful clothes and were full of joy. As he flew trees and flowers bloomed and blossomed. He looked down and discovered he was flying along “on an intricately patterned surface, alive with indescribable and vivid colors—the wing of a butterfly. In fact, millions of butterflies were all around us. . . . a river of life and color, moving through the air” (40).

Alexander mentions “us” because he became aware of the presence of “a beautiful girl with high cheekbones and deep blue eyes” next to him on the wing. She had golden-brown hair and wore the same outfit of peasant-like clothes of the others he’d seen dancing below, “but its colors—powder blue, indigo, and pastel orange-peach—had the same overwhelming, super-vivid aliveness that everything else in the surroundings had” (40).

Describing the girl, Alexander pens the most literary lines of the book:

She looked at me with a look that, if you saw it for a few moments, would make your life up to that point worth living, no matter what had happened in it so far. It was not a romantic look. It was not a look of friendship. It was a look that was somehow beyond all these . . . beyond all the different types of love we have down here on earth. It was something higher, holding all those other kinds of love within itself while at the same time being more genuine and pure than all of them (40).

She communicated with him without speaking aloud. Her message had three parts: “You are loved and cherished, dearly, forever. You have nothing to fear. There is nothing you can do wrong” (41). (In interviews about the book he has explained that he understood this last part of the message to mean he could do no wrong in that world, and that he knows he can do wrong in this world.)

“The Core”

Soon the brilliance of this wonderful new world receded and Alexander found himself descending into a darkness which he referred to as the Core. Here he begins to call his female companion the “Orb,” as she was transformed into an orb of light which guided him to the presence of God.

Oddly, and surely to the disappointment of many readers, at this juncture the narrative is the most brief and least descriptive. He cannot see anything, but Alexander is certain he is in the presence of God, saying that the “Being was so close that there seemed to be no distance at all between God and myself. Yet at the same time, I could sense the infinite vastness of the Creator, could see how completely miniscule I was by comparison” (47). He occasionally uses the term “Om” as the pronoun for God, explaining, “‘Om’ was the sound I remembered hearing associated with that omniscient, omnipotent, and unconditionally loving God, but any descriptive word falls short” (47).

Of all that Alexander reported, one of most astonishing parts of the experience to him was how he learned. He was full of questions, of course, and these he directed to the girl/orb who traveled alongside him.

Each time I silently posed one of these questions, the answer came instantly in an explosion of light, color, love, and beauty that blew through me like a crashing wave. What was important about these bursts was that they didn’t simply silence my questions by overwhelming them. They answered them, but in a way that bypassed language. Thoughts entered me directly. But it wasn’t thought like we experience on earth. It wasn’t vague, immaterial, or abstract. These thoughts were solid and immediate—hotter than fire

and wetter than water—and as I received them I was able to instantly and effortlessly understand concepts that would have taken me years to fully grasp in my earthly life. . . . The knowledge given me was not “taught” in the way that a history lesson or math theorem would be. Insights happened directly, rather than needing to be coaxed and absorbed. Knowledge was stored without memorization, instantly and for good. It didn’t fade, like ordinary information does, and to this day I still possess all of it, much more clearly than I possess the information that I gained over all of my years in school (46, 49).

The return

Early on, Alexander’s companion and guide tells him that although he will be shown many things, he will have to go back. Eventually that happens, for he is transported back to the “Realm of the Earthworm’s-Eye View” (actually Alexander tells of returning to this realm and then upward again to the Core for many roundtrips), and through it back to the time when he awakens in the hospital. En route he says he was given a glimpse of all those who were praying for him.

Then he opens his eyes and finds himself in a hospital room. A family friend in the room runs to tell Alexander’s wife who is in another part of the hospital. She and a doctor rush in to find Alexander thrashing about. The doctor senses that Alexander is irritated by the breathing tube and he removes it. To the shock of everyone, he says to the doctor, “Thank you” (113).

Alexander then goes through a typical phase of post-comatose recovery, including some hallucinations and irrational talk as his brain recovers and recalibrates. Afterward he confides in his older son about his experience during the coma, and taking his son’s advice, he writes everything down before speaking much of it or researching the stories of other NDEs. Originally he wanted to publish his story in a medical journal, but determined that it was more important to make it available to the general public, and thus *Proof of Heaven* was published.

But what about . . .

Just as it’s not difficult to become fascinated by reports of near-death experiences, so it is also not difficult to be skeptical of such claims. For starters, there are the conclusions that Alexander makes about his neurological condition during the coma that many—including some of his colleagues and peers—find unwarranted. In an appendix, Alexander responds to nine “Neuroscientific Hypotheses I Considered to Explain My Experience” (185-88). While he discards some of challenges convincingly, even a non-medical man like myself can get the impression that a few of his responses are incomplete, or fail to adequately rule out certain of the hypotheses. This section seems to be intended primarily for the medical and scientific community, and can be intimidating for nonprofessionals. But even those who find it incomprehensible will not sense that the book is incomplete, nor will they—and this is very important—be unable to effectively evaluate the book on other grounds.

One practical matter Alexander does not address—though I am sure he must have thought about it and would submit some sort of explanation—has to do with the absence of material revealing some of the deep understanding he said he was given to so many questions. As quoted above, Alexander says that during his experience he gained knowledge and wisdom that previously would have taken years to grasp, and that he did so as quickly as Neo in *The Matrix* who had mountains of information downloaded instantly into his brain through a hard-wired connection. What happened to all that he learned? He explicitly says that the knowledge did not fade and that he still has possession of it. How does he display the possession of it today? One would expect flashes of supernatural genius to emerge or the manifestation of incredible new areas of profundity that he had not—nor perhaps had any others—demonstrated before. Unfortunately, no such displays of enhanced mental ability or Solomonic insight appear in the book.

More important questions

But I have other questions about Dr. Alexander's experience that are far more consequential. While I am unqualified to respond to his medical arguments, I have real concerns about his claims that need to be addressed from biblical and theological grounds.

First and foremost, where is Jesus in this experience? Some time after his temporary trip to heaven (in 2 Cor. 12:1-4), the Apostle Paul wrote that his desire was "to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better" (Philippians 1:23). In other words, the heaven Paul had been to and to which he was ready to return was one where he would "be with Christ." Jesus promised the thief on the cross next to Him that "Today you will be *with me* in paradise" (Luke 23:43; emphasis added). When Stephen was martyred, he "gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God" (Acts 7:55). The Apostle John's description of heaven in various chapters in the book of Revelation is of a place where Jesus is the centerpiece, the focus of enraptured angels, and exalted above all other beings and activities. But in Alexander's account of heaven, Jesus is nowhere to be found. In the Scripture, however, heaven is all about Jesus. Biblically, Jesus is what makes heaven to be heaven. Can we reconcile Alexander's description of heaven with that of apostles Paul and John? If not, which shall we believe?

That leads to a second important question: what are we to do with the Bible in light of Dr. Alexander's *Proof of Heaven*? After the foretastes of heaven experienced by Paul and John, they continued to write words from or about Jesus, and claimed the inspiration of God in what they wrote. With the Apostle Paul especially, the written word of God became all the more precious to him after he had seen Jesus and the heaven of Jesus proclaimed in Scripture, and one of his final and most pointed exhortations to his successor Timothy was "preach the word" (2 Timothy 4:2). One does not get the same sense of importance about the Bible after reading *Proof of Heaven*.

Closely related to that is the question of where does Alexander's experience leave us in terms of the biblical gospel? Alexander seems to imply that the heaven he saw awaits virtually everyone, if not literally everyone. All that is necessary for a person to enter that awaiting world is to die. Apparently no amount or quality of religious belief or practice is necessary as a prerequisite. The Bible, however, presents a different reality, such as in Jesus' account of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) where Lazarus is in heaven and the rich man is in torment, and when Jesus warned of those who would call Him "Lord" and claim to have done many great works in His name, but who will be shut out of heaven forever (Matthew 7:21-23). Most importantly, Jesus said that at the final judgment itself there will be many expecting to enter heaven who will be shocked to discover that instead Jesus consigns them to eternal hell (Matthew 25:31-46). In contrast to Alexander's book, the Bible declares that by nature no one is bound for heaven (Ephesians 2:1-3), and that no one can enter heaven except through heaven's door, Jesus Christ (John 10:9; 14:6). Jesus promised that He will receive all who come to Him (John 6:37), but the Bible is quite clear that no one will be received into heaven who does not receive Jesus on this side of heaven (John 1:12).

Four options

In the final analysis, there are only two possibilities: either Alexander truly experienced reality in another dimension while in his coma, or he did not. These two possibilities represent four major options:

1. Alexander's experience was not real, but was instead the mysterious product of extreme trauma to the brain.
2. His experience was real, and the Bible is wrong.
3. His experience was real, and is compatible with the Bible.
4. His experience was real, but he was deceived as to its source.

Let us consider each of these briefly.

1. Alexander's experience was not real

First, there is the possibility that Alexander's experience was not real; rather, in some way or another, it was the result of his rare bacterial meningitis or the "rebooting" of his brain as he came out of the coma. For many, the trump card to all objections—and especially this one—is that Dr. Alexander is a brain surgeon with over twenty years in academic neurosurgery. You may be able to doubt the ordinary guy who suffers brain trauma in a car accident and claims he went to heaven, Alexander's defenders may say, but you can't question a Harvard-trained neurosurgeon who declares that he was taken to heaven during a coma, for he knows better than anyone else what factors indicate that the brain is incapable of thinking or of sensory input. Moreover, his medical records and the attending physicians objectively provide the data upon which Alexander bases his claim that he was physically incapable of the thought processes which could have manufactured the experience, and that he was in this mentally incapacitated condition for a full week. From a biblical perspective, we cannot say that it is impossible for a person to literally see heaven without dying, for the Apostle Paul testified that he was once taken to heaven (in 2 Corinthians 12:1-4). To categorically deny the possibility of such an experience would be to go against the clear teaching of the Bible.

While I am not able to question Dr. Alexander's understanding and interpretation of the data and the physiology involved, it is fair to observe that, as Alexander himself repeatedly states, his condition was an extremely rare one, occurring only once in every ten million people on an annual basis. How dogmatic can one be therefore about what the brain is capable of in such unusual circumstances? Just as Dr. Alexander appeals to his fellow physicians to be open to the reality of an experience they have previously considered impossible, so too scientists (like Dr. Alexander) should be open to previously unknown possibilities of what the human brain is capable of in such exceptional circumstances as Alexander's.

2. Alexander's experience was real, and the Bible is wrong

A second option is that Dr. Alexander's experience as described in *Proof of Heaven* is real and occurred just as he described it, with the result that in many ways the Bible is wrong. If, as Alexander leads readers to believe, heaven is the eventual home of virtually everyone—regardless of their beliefs and actions—or that there may be additional opportunities after death to make it to heaven for those who do not qualify for it in this life, and if the Christ-centered view of heaven depicted by the Bible is a misrepresentation, then it raises the inescapable question of where else the Bible may be wrong since it contradicts all these things. If the Bible's depiction of heaven is unreliable, on what other eternally important matters is it unreliable? If the Bible cannot be trusted to portray heaven accurately, can it be trusted to present God and His attributes accurately? Or Jesus? Or His resurrection? Or salvation?

And for those who choose to believe that Alexander's report corresponds more faithfully to the reality of heaven than does the Bible's, it is fair to ask why they believe such. What persuades them to reject the Bible's statements about heaven in favor of Dr. Alexander's? Is there a compelling reason to trust one man's experience, and that promoted by a commercial publisher, rather than the testimony of several (that is, men such as the apostles Paul and John) who have a track record of timeless, trans-cultural, life-changing truths that have endured the critical scrutiny of scholars and skeptics for two millennia?

3. Alexander's experience was real, and compatible with the Bible

A third alternative is that Alexander actually did visit heaven, and what he reported is fully compatible with the Bible. This view accepts both Alexander's testimony and the teaching of Scripture about heaven as truthful and accurate. The two can be reconciled, according to this perspective, by understanding that they describe different parts of the same thing. According to this way of thinking, Alexander saw such a small portion of the infinity of heaven that he did not get to any of the parts described in Scripture. Thus his experience is by no means a denial of the Bible; rather it simply does not overlap with aspects of heaven addressed or described in the Bible.

At first glance, this is the most attractive option to those who believe in a literal heaven and the truthfulness of the Bible and yet also who long for contemporary experiences of the supernatural that will encourage their faith. Moreover, it is certainly possible that if two individuals have two separate pre-death experiences of heaven that their observations could be both accurate and diverse. One problem, though, is that there appear to be some significant differences when Dr. Alexander and the Bible talk about the same subject.

As has already been mentioned, Jesus is central to the New Testament visions of heaven; not so in Alexander's. Second, Alexander says that "Om" was the sound he remembered being associated with the presence of God. But where is the unceasing sound of "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God, the Almighty, who was, who is, and who is to come" (Isaiah 6:3; Revelation 4:8) being declared by those creatures the Bible says—in both the Old and New Testaments—are the closest to the presence of God?

But even if these matters could be explained, there is a third difficulty with the view that Alexander and the biblical writers simply saw different parts of heaven. The problem is that Alexander's book is more than just a description of heaven. If that were all it conveyed, it would be much easier to reconcile the two reports. But Alexander does not merely relate his observations. He also avoids directly addressing the essential issue of how a person gains admission to heaven, and implicitly denies that the biblical answer to that question is wrong. One finishes *Proof of Heaven* with the assumption that if Alexander really experienced what he claimed, then that is the eternal home of almost everyone as soon as they die. The Bible proclaims that the heaven it reveals is for everyone who is united to Christ by faith, and closed to those who are not.

4. Alexander's experience was real, but he was deceived

A fourth option is that Dr. Alexander's experience was real and not the product of mental trauma, but he was deceived as to its source. This does not seem to be an option on Alexander's radar screen, and certainly next to denying that his experience was real, this would likely be the most undesirable interpretation for him to consider. The irony, however, is that both Alexander and all who believe in the genuineness of his experience have taken a position regarding the existence of unseen spirits, and this position necessitates their own openness to the possibility that God was not the source of what was manifested to Alexander. In other words, if you believe in angels—which hold a prominent position in Alexander's depiction of heaven—then you have to be open to the existence of fallen angels, including Satan, their evil leader, who according to 2 Corinthians 11:14, "masquerades as an angel of light."

If this were the case, why would the enemy of all humanity masquerade as an "angel of light" and treat Dr. Alexander to such a beautiful, compelling, and life-changing vision? What would be the purpose of such an elaborate hoax, and all for one man? One likely reason for the deception would be an attempt to create a sensation and use it to spread a false message about God, the gospel, and eternity. Who could be more convincing about the veracity of such an experience than a Harvard neurosurgeon? The amazing narrative would captivate those already inclined to believe in the reality of heaven and Alexander's exceptional medical credentials could minimize the usual objections from the scientific community.

Is it possible to say definitively that everything Alexander experienced while in a coma was just a sophisticated masquerade by an angel of light? No, of course not. But if the experience actually happened in a spiritual realm, and if a person—like Alexander—affirms the reality of angels, then one also must admit at least the possibility of involvement by the great angelic deceiver. So, if we assume the veracity of Alexander's experience, how can we discern its source? We do so by evaluating how congruent the experience is with known truth about God and heaven, and by whether the fruit of the experience is consistent with the fruit of genuine experiences with God and heaven. Those who believe the Bible to be the wholly true, inspired, self-revelation of God will observe at key points some discrepancies between Alexander's description of heaven and the Bible's, and likely have some concerns regarding the fruit of the event, and thus find reason to question the source of the experience.

What should we think?

In the end, then, how should we think about Dr. Eben Alexander's *Proof of Heaven*? On the plus side we can be grateful for how the book takes a reader with a materialistic, temporally-focused worldview by the shoulders, spins him around and forces him to focus on the existence soon to come in a place that is spiritual and eternal. We can appreciate how Alexander describes heaven as a place that is transcendent, yet tangible; other-worldly, yet recognizable. His book helps people contrast the brevity and sufferings of this life with the possibility of a place overflowing with unmixed and unending love and joy. In a culture where the media does its' best to make the things of this life irresistible, we can appreciate someone who comes along and depicts the next world as more appealing and is able to write about that world in such an alluring way as to create a longing for it.

But what is of foremost importance in evaluating the book is not how it makes us feel, or the sense of wonder or transcendence it may evoke, but whether it is consistent with the teaching of Scripture. Unfortunately, by this standard we must conclude that the book, despite a message that so many find uplifting, is not one to recommend.

I am persuaded that Dr. Alexander is completely sincere and has no intention of deceiving anyone. Nevertheless, *Proof of Heaven* checks every box in the classic categories of false teaching, namely in what it teaches about God, about people and their condition before God, and about God's message to people. Of course, this is not to say that everything the book conveys about these matters is in error, but where it does go wrong is catastrophic.

Summary of the primary difficulties

To summarize the insurmountable difficulties presented by *Proof of Heaven*, first, Jesus is absent and presumed non-essential. Second, all people appear to be headed to heaven, regardless of their sins, beliefs, pursuit of God, trust in Christ, or anything else. Third, God's message to people in the Bible is not fully reliable (for Alexander's presumably more reliable story is not always consistent with the Bible). Moreover, the message from God in the Bible to people is that they have broken His law and need a Savior, and without His salvation there is no hope of heaven; but *Proof of Heaven* implicitly denies that and gives the impression that there is nothing from which people need to be saved, thus making a Savior irrelevant.

So while they may not intend to do so, people who accept Alexander's account as true undermine the truth and authority of the entire Bible. Despite the book's use of some biblical language about God as Creator, about divine love, heaven, angels, etc., it simply does not square with the teaching of the Bible at too many crucial points. As a result, *Proof of Heaven* is an untrustworthy source of information about the nature of heaven, how to get to heaven, and the God of heaven. Much of what Dr. Alexander writes is beautiful, stirring, and appealing, but such descriptions may characterize deception as well as truth, as the Genesis 3 story of the original deception in the Garden of Eden so clearly illustrates. And even though we may long for more information about heaven on this side of it, God has reliably revealed all that is sufficient for us to know about it now in the Bible.²

Longing for heaven is good

Finally, the longing we have for a place like Dr. Alexander describes is a very good thing. To yearn to live in such a beautiful world, a place where people love each other with a kind of love that to experience it "would make your life up to that point worth living, no matter what had happened in it so far. . . . beyond all the different types of love we have down here on earth. . . . something higher, holding all those other kinds of love within itself while at the same time being more genuine and pure than all of them" is not to chase rainbows, but is a reflection of being made in the image of God. To earnestly desire to live in a world of perfect peace and infinite, everlasting joy is not escapism, but an aspiration the Creator engineered deep into our nature.

² For an encouraging, thought-provoking presentation and discussion of the biblical material on heaven, consider [*Heaven*](#) by Randy Alcorn (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale, 2004).

Most of all, to go to the place where God Himself is “the core” of everything—not only the nucleus of the universe, but also the center of our own existence and the source of our eternal happiness—is what we were created for. God made us for Himself, not because He needed us, but because in His infinite goodness He wanted to create beings on whom He could lavish His goodness, beings who could see His incomparable beauty and glory and in so doing enjoy Him forever. And though we all forfeited this privilege by our countless acts of disobedience to the laws of God and frequent apathy to the will of God, the goodness of God has reopened a wide opportunity to return to Him through Jesus, who is “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6).

In a very real sense, heaven is not just for the future. Today—this very day—when a person moves Godward by coming to Jesus, the Holy Spirit of God indwells that person (John 7:37-39), and a foretaste of eternal life with God begins immediately, not merely at death (John 4:14; Romans 8:9-11). And then at death comes the full, unbounded experience of heaven, the heaven of God, where God Himself satisfies every longing in ways even more glorious and enthralling than Alexander portrays.³

Yes, heaven is real. But the greatest “proof of heaven” does not come from a man who claims to have gone there while suffering from bacterial meningitis and met God. Rather, the most reliable proof of heaven is that God came from there and was willing to live here for more than thirty years and suffer crucifixion as a man so that we could be with Him in paradise forever.

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³ See, for example, biblical descriptions of heaven such as in Revelation 21-22.