

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.

What should we think?

We can be grateful for much in *Proof of Heaven*, including its reminders of the brevity of life, and its challenges for those with a materialistic, temporally-focused worldview to think about a place that is spiritual and eternal. But the key to evaluating the book is not found in the sense of wonder or transcendence it may evoke, but whether it is consistent with Scripture. By this standard we must conclude that the book, despite a message that so many find uplifting, is not one to recommend.

Dr. Alexander seems entirely sincere with 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, not everything in the book about these matters is in error, but where it does go wrong is catastrophic. As a result, *Proof of Heaven* is an untrustworthy source about the nature of heaven, how to get to heaven, and the God of heaven.

Longing for heaven is good

The longing we have for a place like Dr. Alexander describes is not escapism, but an aspiration the Creator engineered deep into our nature. To go to the place where God Himself is “the core” of everything—both of the universe and of our own existence—is what we were created for. 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).

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 then rise from the dead so that we could be with Him in paradise forever.

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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, VA 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, his eyes popped open. Soon he would say that during those seven days he had been in heaven.

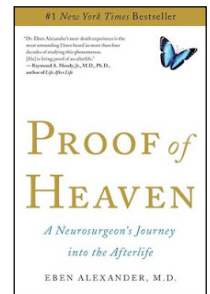
Near-death experiences

It is not difficult to become fascinated by reports of near-death experiences (NDEs), a phenomenon first popularized by the 1975 bestseller, *Life After Life* by Raymond A. Moody. 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).

This particular NDE is fascinating on many levels. In particular, the extremely unusual nature of his medical case and the narrative of Alexander's experiences while in a coma, all make *Proof of Heaven* a book hard to put down.

Alexander's trip to heaven

Dr. Alexander says his experience began in what he termed the “Realm of the Earthworm's-Eye View,” a place of darkness, with something like glowing, dark red roots or blood vessels stretching from far above to far below. Eventually there appeared above him the “Spinning Melody and the Gateway,” through which he passed and entered heaven. Here he found himself flying over the earth, but it was a completely transformed world of beauty and joy.



Millions of butterflies surrounded him and his guide, a beautiful girl of whom Alexander said, “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” (p. 40). She communicated without speaking, saying to him: “You are loved and cherished, dearly, forever. You have nothing to fear. There is nothing you can do wrong [here]” (41).

Then Alexander says he encountered God, whom he described as “the Core.” He could not see anything, but was certain he was in God’s presence. He remembers hearing the sound “Om” associated with God.

Among the parts of the experience most astonishing to Alexander was how he learned. No sooner did he pose a question to his guide and “the answer came instantly in an explosion of light, color, love, and beauty” (46). Without language, thoughts entered him directly. Knowledge was stored without memorization. “To this day,” writes Alexander, “I still possess all of it” (49). He does not address how or whether he now manifests all the knowledge he says he retained.

Important questions

While I am unqualified to respond to the medical issues involved in Alexander’s case, I have real concerns about his claims that need to be addressed from biblical and theological grounds. First, where is Jesus in this experience? In the book of Revelation, the description of heaven by the Apostle John is of a place where Jesus is the centerpiece, exalted above all other beings and activities. Other passages (such as Luke 23:43, Philippians 1:23, and Acts 7:55) imply the same. But in Alexander’s account of heaven, Jesus is absent. In the Bible, heaven is all about Jesus.

Next, what are we to do with the Bible in light of Alexander’s book? After the foretastes of heaven experienced by Paul and John, the written word of God became all the more precious to them. One does not get the same sense of importance about the Bible after reading *Proof of Heaven*.

Third, where does Alexander’s experience leave us in terms of the biblical gospel? He implies that the heaven he saw awaits virtually everyone. Apparently no amount or quality of religious belief or practice is a necessary prerequisite. The Bible presents a different reality. Jesus said many expecting to enter heaven will be shocked when He consigns them to hell (Matthew 25:31-46). In contrast to Alexander’s book, the Bible declares that by nature no one is heaven-bound (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 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

The possibility exists that Alexander’s experience was not real; rather, it resulted somehow from his rare bacterial meningitis or the “rebooting” of his brain as he came out of the coma. As Alexander himself repeatedly states, his condition was extremely rare, occurring annually only once in every ten million people. How dogmatic can one be therefore about what the brain is capable of in such unusual circumstances?

2. Alexander’s experience was real, and 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, 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.

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

According to this way of thinking, Alexander saw such a tiny bit of the infinity of heaven that he simply did not get to nor depict any of the parts described in Scripture. The problem is that his book is more than just a description of heaven. One finishes *Proof of Heaven* with the assumption that if Alexander really experienced what he claimed, then heaven is the eternal home of almost everyone. The Bible, by contrast, proclaims that the heaven it reveals is for everyone who is united to Christ by faith, but closed to those who are not.

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

It is possible that Dr. Alexander’s experience was real and not the product of mental trauma, but he was deceived as to its source. If you believe in angels—which hold a prominent position in Alexander’s depiction of heaven—then you must be open to the existence of fallen angels, including their evil chief Satan, who according to 2 Corinthians 11:14, “masquerades as an angel of light.” Why would Satan do this to Alexander? One likely