

RESPONDING TO THE “HEAVEN TOURISM” CLAIMS

Introduction

- There have been a wave of books recently claiming to describe the account of those who have visited heaven (90 Minutes in Heaven, Proof of Heaven, To Heaven and Back, Waking up in Heaven, Heaven is Real But so is Hell)
- One of the most popular books is *Heaven is for Real* by Todd Burpo and Lynn Vincent, published in 2011
- It has sold nearly 8 million copies, been translated in 25 languages, and was made into a movie released in April 2014
- This book recounts 4-year old Colton Burpo’s vision of heaven where he claims to have visited heaven during surgery after a burst appendix
- The book is full of fanciful descriptions of heaven enlivened by a child’s imagination
- How do we respond to this issue of “heavenly field trips?”

Reasons to Reject Such Claims

Scripture Must Always Define Experience Not Vice Versa

- Scripture is the only reliable source of information about the heavenly kingdom
- The description of heaven given in Scripture is sufficient for us to understand it
- No amount of visions, dreams, or near-death experiences will enhance the revelation concerning heaven

2 Timothy 3:16-17 ~ All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work

Ezekiel 1; Revelation 4-5, 21-22

It may be quite fascinating to read these intricately detailed accounts of people who claim to have come back from heaven, but that hobby is as dangerous as it is seductive. Readers not only get a twisted, unbiblical picture of heaven from these tall tales; they also imbibe a subjective, superstitious, shallow brand of spirituality...Studying mystical accounts of supposed journeys into the afterlife yields nothing but confusion, contradiction, false hope, bad doctrine, and a host of similar evils.

John MacArthur, Grace to You blog “Heaven is Real; Hallucinations are Not;” accessed 05/22/14.

It’s a little heaven below, to imagine sweet things. But never think that imagination can picture heaven. When it is most sublime, when it is freest from the dust of earth, when it is carried up by the greatest knowledge, and kept steady by the most extreme caution, imagination cannot picture heaven. “It hath not entered the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him.” Imagination is good, but not to picture to us heaven. Your imaginary heaven you will find by-and-by to be all a mistake; though you may have piled up fine castles, you will find them to be castles in the air, and they will vanish like thin clouds before the gale. For imagination cannot make a heaven. “Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath it entered the heart of man to conceive” it.

Charles H. Spurgeon, *The New Park Street Pulpit*, 6 vols. (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1856), 2:20-21.

- Pursuing a fascination in heaven *apart from the Scriptures* brings serious spiritual danger – superstition, gnosticism, occultism, New Age philosophies
- It is impossible to acquire a better understanding of heaven than we already have in Scripture

- In fact, Scripture commands us to not go beyond what is written

1 Corinthians 4:6 ~ Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively applied to myself and Apollos for your sakes, so that in us you may learn not to exceed what is written

- Unfortunately, this is another example of how contemporary evangelicals are seeking extra-biblical revelations through visions, dreams, still small voices, inner promptings, etc.

Heaven Is for Real... is likely to be read and deemed harmless by the typical evangelical. It is *not* harmless. It denigrates the authority and sufficiency of Scripture. It confounds faith with superstition. It subtly elevates human experience to a higher level than the Word of God. It purports to reveal things about God and the heavenly realm that are not taught in Scripture. And it repeatedly insinuates that the testimony of someone who has been mystically enlightened can be a more effective stimulant to faith than Scripture alone.

John MacArthur, Grace to You blog, "The Idolatry of Experience;" accessed May 22, 2014

- Books like this fly in the face of the Reformational principle of *Sola Scriptura*

Often These Claims Blatantly Contradict Scripture

- Examples from *Heaven is for Real*:
 - "Just as I was processing the implications of my son's statement—that he had *met* John the Baptist—Colton spied a plastic horse among his toys and held it up for me to look at. 'Hey, Dad, did you know Jesus has a horse?' 'A horse?' 'Yeah, a rainbow horse. I got to pet him.'" (p. 63)
 - When his father asked Colton what the Holy Spirit looked like: "'Hmm,' Colton replies. 'That's kind of a hard one . . . he's kind of blue.'" (p. 103)
- If such claims contradict Scripture, then the Bible suggests that the interpretation of their experience, whatever that experience was, is a lie
- Scripture is always the final judge of whether a "prophet's" revelation is accurate:

Deuteronomy 13:5 ~ But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has counseled rebellion against the LORD your God who brought you from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery, to seduce you from the way in which the LORD your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from among you.

Isaiah 8:19-20 ~ When they say to you, "Consult the mediums and the spiritists who whisper and mutter," should not a people consult their God? Should they consult the dead on behalf of the living? To the "law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn

2 Peter 1:16-21 ~ For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For when He received honor and glory from God the Father, such an utterance as this was made to Him by the Majestic Glory, "This is My beloved Son with whom I am well-pleased"—and we ourselves heard this utterance made from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain. So we have the prophetic word made more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts. But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God

- Furthermore, we are commanded to be discerning and test what we hear:

1 Thessalonians 5:21-22 ~ But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil

1 John 4:1 ~ Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

Scripture Never Encourages a Morbid Craving for Information about the Afterlife

- The Old Testament actually prohibits it:

Deuteronomy 18:10-12 ~ There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, one who uses divination, one who practices witchcraft, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer, or one who casts a spell, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead. For whoever does these things is detestable to the LORD; and because of these detestable things the LORD your God will drive them out before you

Leviticus 20:27 ~ Now a man or a woman who is a medium or a spiritist shall surely be put to death. They shall be stoned with stones, their bloodguiltiness is upon them.

- Likewise, the New Testament helps us understand heaven better but still does not encourage any extra-biblical revelation of it
- Nothing is known about what happened to Lazarus' soul during the 4 days he was dead (John 11:17)
- Nothing is known about the circumstances surrounding the synagogue officials' daughter who died (Matthew 9:18ff)
- Nothing is known about Tabitha/Dorcas in death (Acts 9: 36ff)
- Nothing is known about Eutychus during the time he was dead (Acts 20:9-12)
- Even Paul was reluctant to share about his experience of being taken to the dwelling place of God:

2 Corinthians 12:2-4 ~ I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a man was caught up to the third heaven. And I know how such a man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows—was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak

- Paul was actually forbidden to discuss what he saw and heard on his visit to heaven
- What about those who were given a glimpse of heaven and did write about it? Like Isaiah in Isaiah 6? Like Ezekiel in Ezekiel 1? Like John in Revelation 4-5?
- What is unique about these individuals is that they were specifically commanded by God to write about what they saw and were carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21) such that their writings became part of the inspired Scriptures!

These Claims Lack the Weightiness/Emphasis on God's Majesty and Glory in Heaven

- A cursory reading of the Biblical passages describing heaven present it as a place where the glory of God is what fills, illuminates, and defines heaven
- The centerpiece of heaven is God and His majesty....it is a place of awe and wonder, not because of WHAT is in heaven but WHO is in heaven
- According to passages like Ezekiel 1, Isaiah 6, and Revelation 4-5, people in heaven are awestruck in the presence of Jesus
- When John saw Jesus in heaven, full of glory, he fell at Jesus' feet like a dead man (Rev 1:13-17)
- Thus, the emphasis in Scripture is that heaven is a place of breathtaking glory and those who are given a glimpse of it recognize their own fear and shame in the presence of such glory
- Yet, today's fanciful stories about heaven lack much of this weightiness and emphasis on God's glory
- Instead, the focus is on mundane features like picnics, games, familiar faces, odd conversations

- Rather than a Godward focus, such accounts betray a man-ward focus with an emphasis on how they felt – how peaceful, happy, joyful they were...how fun the experience was...how comforted they were...how they received accolades...how they now understand everything better
- While many of these things are true about heaven, it is not what captures the heart of those like Isaiah and John who have been there
- They say comparatively little about God and His glory...precious little about the majesty and grace of the One who glory fills heaven
- This is evidence of the narcissistic culture we live in

Conclusion

If you struggle believing what the Bible says, but learn to find security in the testimony of a toddler, well, I feel sorry for you. And I do not mean this in a condescending way. If God's Word is not sufficient for you, if the testimony of his Spirit, given to believers, is not enough for you, you will not find any true hope in the unproven tales of a child. This hope may last for a moment, but it will not sustain you, it will not bless you, in those times when hope is waning and times are hard. So reject this book. Do not read it. Do not believe it. And do not feel guilty doing so.

Tim Challies, challies.com, "Heaven is for Real" book review, accessed May 22, 2014.