

“Near-Death” Experiences

Introduction. People who come close to death or encounter a temporary state of clinical or emotional crisis often report having “exceptional” or “mystical” experiences, called “near-death” experiences. According to a 1997 poll used in the United States and cited by *U.S. News & World Report*, there are an estimated 15 million adults who have had “near-death” experiences (or about 5% of the population). In Europe, the estimate is 4%.

“Near-death” experiences are defined as intense, emotional experiences that occur when a person is close to death or in a clinical compromise such as an accident, illness, combat, surgery or emotional trauma, and then goes on to have one or more of the common characteristics of the “near-death” experience.

Researchers say that the Bible has very little to say about life after death. Those who have read the Bible with any profit at all know this is totally untrue. The Bible is the only reliable source that can truly define life and death.

I. “Near-Death” Experiences

- A. In 2001, Raymond Moody and Elisabeth Kübler-Ross authored a best selling book entitled, *Life After Life*. It was billed as a thoroughly researched study of the experiences around 150 people have had with death and “near-death” experiences.
 1. The book seeks to prove that there is life after death and that it is filled with joy, reunion with others who have died and reward. No matter what religious views one held in life, whether “Christian,” Jewish, Buddhist, Islamic or those with no religion whatsoever, those who pass into the life after life are rewarded with peace and joy. In every case, they all returned to life after being pronounced legally dead.
 2. “Near-death” experiences tend to be characterized by one of more elements. The following is a partial list:
 - a) Sensing inexpressible peace, comfort and unconditional love.
 - b) Feeling relief from pain.
 - c) Separating from the physical body, a feeling of floating.
 - d) Seeing and/or sensing a superior being.
 - e) Seeing beautiful scenery and/or hearing beautiful music.
 - f) Seeing and communicating with spiritual beings (often deceased loved ones or unfamiliar relatives).
 - g) Moving through a dark space or tunnel.
 - h) Being surrounded by a brilliant light and/or unfamiliar colors.
 - i) Possessing unlimited knowledge.
 - j) Communicating telepathically.

- k) Experiencing a review of your life.
 - l) Coming to a physical boundary.
3. Moody claimed that not one of the entire number had the same experience as the others. He also said that of those who were pronounced dead and revived, at least eight but no more than twelve of the previously elements were present. Some, he said, "remembered nothing when they returned to life."
 4. Several lingering physical aftereffects have been claimed by those who have "near-death" experiences:
 - a) Increased sensitivity to medications of all kinds.
 - b) Core body temperature routinely in the 96-97° range.
 - c) Blood pressure lower than prior to the "near-death" experience.
 - d) Increased allergies and sensitivity to chemicals in soaps, lotions, etc.
 - e) Interactions with electronic equipment; e.g., the inability to wear battery-run watches.
 5. There are also allegedly several lingering emotional aftereffects from "near-death" experiences:
 - a) They no longer fear death.
 - b) They become less materialistic, change to altruistic jobs and do more service for others.
 - c) They become more spiritual, affectionate and emotional.
 - d) They supposedly possess new knowledge or "gifts" (e.g., healing, psychic ability) and information.
 - e) They feel sadness, loneliness and alienation.
 - f) They have difficulty describing the experience.
 - g) They have increased sensitivity to light, noise and violence.
- B. Psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross is highly acclaimed for her work with the terminally ill. Some of her research has been valuable in that she has carefully analyzed the emotional states (e.g., fear, anger, etc.) through which many people pass when they learn that their death is imminent (cf. *On Death and Dying*, New York: MacMillan, 1969). These are now commonly known as the "Five Stages of Grief."
1. The doctor has, however, ventured far afield from her area of expertise in speculating about human immortality. Kübler-Ross once believed that death was the end of human existence.
 2. She now has changed her opinion on mortality -- solely as a result of the testimony of some patients who were pronounced "clinically dead," but who later were "revived" to tell of amazing "near-death" experiences. Her views (and others of a similar nature) have received considerable attention in recent years.

- C. Some religionists have appealed to Kübler-Ross' assertions as an example of "scientific evidence" for life after death. However, I believe we can confidently affirm that this so-called "evidence" is worthless.

II. ***The Bible's Teaching About Life And Death***

- A. In the book, *Life After Life*, Moody gave three definitions to death.
1. He said death is the absence of clinically detectable signs of life, such as stoppage of the heart, blood pressure so low as to be unreadable or dropping body temperature.
 2. He also said death is the absence of brain wave activity. This would be impossible to apply in the cases of those who claim they died and remembered what happened in the experience. There is not enough time to perform the very complex test to determine brain wave activity when one is dying. Moody also admitted, "Flat EEG tracings have been obtained in persons who were later resuscitated," which indicates that the test, even had it been used, could never have been definitive or conclusive.
 3. Finally, he said that death is the irreversible loss of vital functions, the most restricted definition of death. Measured by this definition, none of those making the claim of a return to life could have actually died.
- B. The Bible clearly teaches that there is life after death. In the Bible, however, the death of the person was unquestionably true. There are numerous instances in the Bible where a person was brought back to life after death.
1. Elijah revived the life of the son of the widow of Zarephath (1 Kings 17:17-23).
 2. Elisha brought back to life the son of a Shunammite woman (2 Kings 4:32).
 - a) The cases of Elijah and Elisha cannot be explained away as resuscitation apart from the miraculous intervention by God.
 - b) In order for such emergency procedures to be effective they must be initiated almost at once. If a person does not receive such treatment almost instantly, irreversible brain damage occurs.
 - c) In the case of the child Elisha revived the child had been dead several hours before the prophet reached the lad. He travelled five to six hours from his home at Mount Carmel to where the Shunammite woman lived.
 3. Because of the "bands of the Moabites," a dead man was cast into Elisha's tomb, making contact with his bones, and was revived (2 Kings 13:20-21).
 4. Jesus raised the widow of Nain's son (Luke 7:11-17).

5. Jesus raised the daughter of Jairus, a ruler of the synagogue (Matthew 9:18-26; Mark 5:21-24-43; Luke 8:40-56).
 6. He also raised Lazarus, who had already begun to decompose in the grave (John 11:1-44).
 7. When Jesus died on the cross, many of the saints arose (Matthew 27:52).
 8. The apostle Peter raised Tabitha (Acts 9:40).
 9. Paul brought Eutychus back to life (Acts 20:9-10).
 10. The single most notable case in history is that of Jesus (1 Corinthians 15:3-4).
 - a) His body was gone from a tomb where it had been laid, sealed and kept under guard (Matthew 27:57-60, 66; 28:6).
 - b) The testimony that He returned to life is irrefutable because of credible eyewitnesses (1 Corinthians 15:5-8).
- C. So there is no question that some people have returned to life after death to live a normal life. Yet the data differs from what the Bible teaches and the claims made in modern day cases. The most significant fact is that none of those in the Bible who came back to life told anything to anyone about what they experienced.
1. Is it not strange that these alleged "near-death" experiences generally transpire under hospital conditions -- as physicians are making efforts at resuscitation? Moreover, the alleged "resurrection" consistently occurs within a very abbreviated span of time. Where is the person who was "clinically dead," i.e., really dead for four days (as in the case of Lazarus) who has been revived and can testify of his return from the "other side"? There is not a single example of this sort that can be documented.
 2. In each case of "near-death" experiences, no factual information is given describing any aspect of the experience. I do not question that people go through amazing experiences when they are near death. I do not question that those experiences are indelibly engraved in their memory. However, those experiences and memories are from the same source that produce fantasies and dreams!
 - a) In fact, one may have had some sort of vision or dream, but that is no assurance it is from God. Paul wrote that Satan can cloak himself as an "*angel of light*" (2 Corinthians 11:14).
 - b) An "*angel of light*" which can adapt to anyone's religious inclination and background is not the Lord Jesus Christ, not the Holy Spirit nor the Father of lights. Beware of such visions and reports.
 3. Though there are resurrections mentioned in the Bible, they were exceptional. They were designed exclusively to confirm the revelation of divine truth (Mark 16:20), and not merely to return people

back to an earthly domain. Such signs are not being duplicated today.

- D. The Bible gives us the one real answer to life and death.
1. God gives "life, and breath, and all things" (Acts 17:25).
 2. In 1 Kings 17:22, when the soul came back to the child, he revived. The inference here is that the body is dead when the soul is absent from the body.
 3. Ecclesiastes 9:5-6, 10 clearly indicates that once someone dies, they do not return to this earthly realm.
 4. In Ecclesiastes 12:7, Solomon tells us that the spirit goes back to God when we die.
 5. Once the spirit has actually left the body, the body is indeed dead (James 2:26).
- E. Dr. Kübler-Ross describes the postmortem emotional experiences of the religious and the non-religious as being precisely identical; supposedly the deceased had feelings of wholeness and peace. She declared, "None of the patients who have had a death experience, and returned, are ever again afraid to die."
1. This notion is totally foreign to the teaching of the Bible. Are we to believe that the apostle Paul and Charles Manson will have the same after-death environment?
 2. Compare the post-death experiences of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:22-24. The rich man certainly did not have feelings of "wholeness and peace."
- F. Moody and Ross also stated, "There was a cultural stamp to the visions. Most Americans saw loved ones, most Indians saw religious figures. Religion determined the identity of the figure; no Christian patient saw a Hindu deity, and no Hindu saw Jesus."
1. If the Bible is true, how can these various interpretations ("cultural stamp") concerning "near-death" experiences be accurate?
 - a) This implies that the afterlife is whatever we determine it to be in our mind.
 - b) Would the above fact not argue that "near-death" experiences are indeed the product of the mind, not reality?
 2. The scriptures teach that when we die we go to a place where we await the future judgment. There are four words used in the Bible for this intermediate place:
 - a) Sheol.
 - (1) This term appears sixty-five times in the Old Testament and has been variously translated as "hell" (31 times); "grave" (31 times); and "pit" (3 times).

- (2) It corresponds with "hades" and essentially means the realm of the dead although the context can alter the meaning slightly.
- b) Hades.
 - (1) This term occurs eleven times in the New Testament and is the realm of the dead. This is not the grave, nor is it the permanent region of the soul.
 - (2) Hades is the intermediate region where we await the final judgment. After we die, our spirit resides in Hades, although there are two separate parts; one for the righteous and one for the wicked.
- c) Gehenna.
 - (1) This term occurs twelve times in the New Testament and is the meaning of hell according to our modern understanding (i.e., a place of eternal punishment).
 - (a) Gehenna was the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, south of Jerusalem. Ahaz and Manasseh, two wicked kings of Judah, sacrificed their sons there to the heathen god Moloch (2 Chronicles 28:3; 33:6 Jeremiah 32:35).
 - (b) King Josiah defiled the place (2 Kings 23:10) and it became the city dump, with fires continually burning in it.
 - (2) The Jews then made "Gehenna" the name for the final judgment and the place of eternal punishment. Possibly no word was more repulsive and descriptive of horror than "Gehenna."
- d) Tartarus.
 - (1) This name only occurs once in the New Testament (2 Peter 2:4). Tartarus was the name in classical mythology for the subterranean abyss in which rebellious gods and other such beings as the Titans were punished.
 - (2) The word was, however, taken over into Hellenistic Judaism and used in connection with fallen angels.
 - (a) Vine states, "[This] is neither Sheol nor Hades nor Hell, but the place where those angels whose special sin is referred to in that passage are confined 'to be reserved unto judgment;' the region is described as 'pits of darkness.'"
 - (b) Thayer states, "The name of a subterranean region, doleful and dark, regarded by the ancient Greeks as the abode of the wicked dead, where they suffer punishment for their evil deeds; it answers to the Gehenna of the Jews."

- i) As seen in Luke 16, Hades is composed of two realms: one for the righteous ("Abraham's bosom," vs. 22) and one for the wicked ("place of torment," vs. 28).
 - ii) Just as "Abraham's bosom" is analogous to "paradise" (Luke 23:43), representing the abode of the righteous dead, "hell" (2 Peter 2:4) is analogous to "place of torment" which represents the place of the wicked dead.
- 3. Those who die leave this world to stand before God to be judged (Hebrews 9:27-29). All are judged together before the judgment seat of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:10; Revelation 20:11-15). After the judgment, we go to "everlasting punishment" or "life eternal" (Matthew 25:46).
- G. Dr. Maurice Rawlings, a cardiologist, published a book entitled, *To Hell And Back*, where patients recount being under extreme duress because of being enveloped in a black, heavy darkness complete with feelings of torment and isolation.
 - 1. Rawlings writes, "If the interview of the person who has been brought back to life is delayed just a little bit, much less days, weeks, or months after the fact, only the positive experiences will be found. The negative experiences have long since been relegated to the painless portions of the memory ... The average doctor will relate only his most impressive diagnoses, and say nothing of past mistakes. Should we expect less from the patients?"
 - 2. Concerning the lack of negative "near-death" experiences, Rawlings writes, "Perhaps the greatest reason for the paucity of negative reports is the defective method of data collection. Methods are used that disregard the simple bell-curve distribution for population studies and scientific information. There are invariably two extremes to any curve, and bias results when investigation is limited to only one end of the curve while the other end is disregarded or purposely omitted." In short, information such as this is discounted by researchers who are predisposed to follow a specific direction of evidence.

III. **An Alternate Explanation?**

- A. An Associated Press article dated Wednesday, September 18, 2002 and written by Joseph B. Verrengia attempts to explain these "near-death" experiences. He claims that a new study, conducted at the University Hospitals of Geneva and Lausanne in Switzerland, suggests these "near-death" experiences may be influenced by a portion of the brain misfiring under stress. Last December, the British medical journal *Lancet* published a Dutch study in which 344 cardiac patients were resus-

cited from clinical death. About 12 percent reported seeing light at the end of a tunnel, or speaking to dead relatives.

- B. The Swiss researchers point to a processing center in the brain known as the angular gyrus.
 - 1. The angular gyrus is thought to play an important role in the way the brain analyzes sensory information to give us a perception of our own bodies.
 - 2. When it misfires, they speculate, the result can be visions of floating outside of ourselves.
 - a) The researchers mapped the brain activity of a 43-year old woman who had been experiencing seizures for 11 years. They implanted electrodes to stimulate portions of her brain's right temporal lobe. The temporal lobe, which includes the angular gyrus structure, is associated with perception of sound, touch, memory and speech.
 - b) Neurologist Dr. Olaf Blanke, the study's lead researcher, suspects that the right angular gyrus integrates signals from the visual system, as well as information on touch and balance. When electrical stimulation was applied, the patient reported seeing herself "lying in bed, from above, but I only see my legs and lower trunk." She also described herself as "floating" near the ceiling.
 - c) Other researchers have suggested that "near-death" experiences occur as brain cells die from lack of oxygen, or when the brain releases pain-reducing chemicals called endorphins.
 - 3. Although Dr. Blanke stated, "We do not fully understand the neurological mechanism that causes 'out-of-body' experiences," the interesting point of this article is to see that medical science is corroborating teaching found in the Bible.
- C. There are other researchers who believe that "near-death" experiences can be explained by neurochemistry and are the result of brain states that occur due to a dying, demented or drugged brain.
 - 1. According to vision researcher Dr. Tomasz S. Troscianko of the University of Bristol, neural noise and retino-cortical mapping explain the common experience of passage down a tunnel from darkness into a bright light.
 - 2. Susan Blackmore attributes the feelings of extreme peacefulness of the "near death" experiences to the release of endorphins in response to the extreme stress of the situation. The buzzing or ringing sound is attributed to cerebral anoxia and consequent effects upon the connections between brain cells.
 - 3. Dr. Karl Jansen has reproduced "near-death" experiences with ketamine, a short-acting hallucinogenic, dissociative anesthetic.

- a) The purpose of the anesthesia is for the patient to be “dissociated” and “removed from their body” so that it is possible to carry out surgical procedures. This is completely different from the unconsciousness produced by conventional anesthetics.
 - b) Ketamine is an uncontrolled drug in most countries, and remains in use as an anesthetic for children in industrialized countries and all ages in the third world as it is cheap and easy to use. Anesthetists prevent patients from having “near-death” experiences (“emergence phenomena”) by the co-administration of sedatives which produce “true” unconsciousness rather than dissociation.
 - c) According to Dr. Jansen, ketamine can reproduce all the main features of the “near-death” experiences, including travel through a dark tunnel into the light, the feeling that one is dead, communing with God, hallucinations, “out-of-body” feelings, strange noises, etc.
4. So the visual and auditory perceptions occurring while “near-death” experiences may be produced by a variety of neuronal mechanisms.
- a) In fact, there is now evidence that patients who appear brain dead may in fact be capable of conscious thought.
 - b) Furthermore, many people who have not been near death have had experiences that seem identical to “near-death” experiences. These mimicking experiences are often the result of psychosis (due to severe neurochemical imbalance) or drug usage, such as marijuana, LSD or DMT.

Conclusion. The only evidence for life after death is the historical testimony of the Bible (cf. 2 Timothy 1:10). However, that is ample proof, for the scriptures can be shown to be the inspired revelation from God. The issue of life-beyond-death does not pertain to the arena of modern science. The important point that everyone needs to remember is that this life is but a stage of preparation for the life to come. To prepare, one must accept what God has revealed of Himself and His Son and obey from the heart that form of teaching (Romans 6:17-18).