

A Look at Life After Life

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“It is a poor thing for anyone to fear that which is inevitable.” So wrote Tertullian, the third century church father, about death.

But men do fear death, as the Bible tells us they will (Hebrews 2:15). And they seize on anything that seems to cast light on the darkness that surrounds the subject of death in order to have a glimpse of “the other side.”

This undoubtedly accounts for the popularity of the work of respected medical researchers Elisabeth Kubler-Ross and Raymond Moody, author of the bestseller, ***Life After Life***, which achieved a condensation in the ***Reader’s Digest***. The death-bed experiences they report indicate not only that there is life after death, but also that it is a life of joy, rewards, reunion—regardless of one’s religion or lack of it.

A composite experience, as reported by Moody, includes moving through a long, dark tunnel (after being pronounced dead), watching resuscitation efforts from “outside” one’s body (though still having a “body”), being greeted by relatives and friends who died earlier, encountering a being of light who evaluated the life and who forgives, then being asked to return to this life, and, in every case, returning to this life.

Though Moody claims to know of around one hundred and fifty such experiences, his research was based on detailed interviews with fifty people, no two of whom had precisely identical experiences, and none of whom reported experiencing all the components of the composite experience. (Moody lists “fifteen or so” components and reports that most experience eight or more but no more than twelve.) He acknowledges too that some remembered nothing when they “returned to life.”

How shall we evaluate these reports? If they are to be trusted, then how do they fit into biblical revelation? Raymond Moody claims that the Bible has little to say on the

subject of life after death. This is simply not so. But what it does say never includes anything like his composite picture. So what do these experiences mean?

1. THE EXPERIENCES REPORTED DO NOT RELATE TO IRREVERSIBLE DEATH

The research is not dealing with irreversible death, or death followed by resurrection. Admittedly, even those who work in this field do not agree on the definition of death. Moody suggests three such definitions, acknowledging that the cases he reports only fit the first. Those definitions are:

(1) death as the absence of clinically detectable signs, such as the heart stopping, blood pressure so low as to be unreadable, body temperature dropping.

(2) The absence of brain wave activity, a criterion impossible to apply in these reported cases, since there is not enough time to do the complicated test under emergency conditions. Moody also points out that “flat EEG tracings have been obtained in persons who were later resuscitated” indicating that the test, even if it could have been used, would have been inconclusive in proving that death occurred.

(3) The most restricted definition of death is that it is the irreversible loss of vital functions. Measured by this definition, of course, none of the reported cases can be described as having been dead. But there are some biblical examples that fit this third definition!

Does the Bible give us any clues that would help us define death? **James 2:26** describes death as the separation of the spirit (the immaterial aspect of man) from the body (the material; see also **Ecclesiastes 12:7**). Normally, it is expected that the spirit will not return to the body it left in order to bring it back to the experiences of this life (**Psalm 6:5; Ecclesiastes 9:10; John 11:39**). There have, of course, been exceptions. Elijah brought a widow’s son back to life (**1 Kings 17:17-24**), though some question if the phrase “**there was no breath in him**” means that he was actually dead? Nevertheless, both mother and Elijah thought he was dead (vv. 18, 20), and the description of his return to life (v. 22) substantiates this.

However, no one questions that the Shunammite’s son, whom Elisha restored to life, was dead (**2 Kings 4:32**). There is no way this can be construed as a cardiopulmonary resuscitation apart from a miraculous intervention of God. Such resuscitation has to be initiated almost immediately to prevent irreversible damage to the brain; but this child had been dead some hours before Elisha arrived on the scene. It was a five-to-six-hour journey from the Shunammite’s home to Mount Carmel where Elisha was. Later the bones of Elisha were involved in a bona fide resurrection (**2 Kings 13:20-21**).

Our Lord reversed “irreversible death” in the cases of three people: Jairus’s daughter (**Mark 5:21-24, 35-43**), the only son of the widow of Nain (**Luke 7:11-15**), and Lazarus (**John 11:1-44**). In all these cases the people had been dead for hours or days, and witnesses attested to that fact. In no case was there any report of anything they may have experienced between death and their return to life.

Death in these biblical cases was death in the most restricted sense the irreversible loss of vital functions. Thus the returns to life were not resuscitations, but resurrections (though involving the same body that died, not the future resurrection body). None of the cases reported by Moody or others involved death in this sense, nor resurrection, only resuscitation .

2. THE RESULTS SOMETIMES FURNISH FALSE INFORMATION ABOUT LIFE AFTER DEATH

In the investigations, the things people report experiencing while being resuscitated actually furnish no information about “life after death.” That these people had certain experiences which they remember during that time we cannot deny, but that these experiences reveal anything about the afterlife is simply not so. Some reported approaching a barrier beyond which they could not go (is this irreversible death?), and no one reported any experience past that barrier. But the Bible does.

At death the believer passes immediately into the presence of God while his earthly body begins to decay (**2 Corinthians 5:1, 8; Philippians 1:23**). No judgment or review of life occurs at this time, for all believers will be judged at the same future time at the judgment seat of Christ, not when each one dies (**2 Corinthians 5:10; 1 Corinthians 3: 11-15**).

The unbeliever at death goes to hades where, in a conscious state, he waits for the resurrection of his body and the judgment of the Great White Throne (**Luke 16:23; Revelation 20:11-15**). In His teaching concerning the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16: 19-31) the Lord taught:

- (1) conscious existence after death,
- (2) the reality of the torment of hades,
- (3) no second chance for salvation after death, and
- (4) no possibility of the dead communicating with the living to warn them to repent.

Was Stephen’s experience of seeing the Lord at the right hand of the Father similar to some of the near-death experiences (**Acts 7:56**)! No, simply because Stephen saw this

before he was physically abused and stoned. This was an “in-the-body” experience while he was not only alive but totally alert.

What about Paul’s unique experience recorded in **2 Corinthians 12:1-4**? He himself acknowledged that it may have been an “out-of-body” experience, but he was uncertain whether he experienced a corporeal ascension into heaven or an incorporeal one. It is difficult to link this visionary experience with death (the only possibility would be to associate it with his stoning at Lystra which apparently did not kill him, **Acts 14:19**). Likely he had this experience while in good health, and whatever was revealed to him was classified material, not to be communicated to others.

In some instances, the reports furnish false information about “the other side.” The light which some saw was variously identified, and the identifications were conditioned by the person’s religious upbringing.

“There was a cultural stamp to the visions. Most Americans saw loved ones, some Indians saw religious figures. Religion determined the identity of the figure; no Christian patient saw a Hindu deity, and no Hindu saw Jesus.”⁽¹⁾

Furthermore, the reports almost universally eliminate any references to torment or hell. Moody does report experiences of an “unpleasant limbo state” in some attempted suicide cases; but generally the reports promote universalism; i.e., God will eventually save everyone. For example, Dr. George Ritchie, a psychiatrist and a Presbyterian who had an out-of-body experience reported that it changed his conventional views on heaven and hell. “I saw no hell-fire, no heads rolling in the streets. I know beyond a doubt that the Christ I saw will accept everyone, good or bad, even those who didn’t believe in him.”⁽²⁾ Dr. Kubler-Ross also reported that her research never included “a judgmental God.”⁽³⁾

Once again the monster of experience-creating-truth rears its ugly head in open defiance of the truth of God’s Word.

3. THE REPORTS DO GIVE INFORMATION THAT HELPS EXPLAIN THE EXPERIENCES

Some clear facts do emerge from these reports which help to explain them. Some of those facts are as follows:

(1) These were experiences of dying people, not dead people. Not all parts of the body die at the same instant, so while certain clinical signs may have been absent, the body had not totally ceased to function. Even Moody does not rule out that residual biological functions of a dying body might account for these experiences.⁽⁴⁾ But none of the cases involved returning from the grave.

(2) Some of the aspects of the composite picture of “life after life” happened to those who were not even near death or who were not even injured. A truck driver reported that his life passed in review during the frightening moments of a bad skid and wreck from which he escaped completely uninjured.

(3) An out-of-body experience can evidently be produced by a normally healthy human being. Dr. Kubler-Ross claims she has induced such experiences on herself on several occasions. A skeptical report recounted such an experience under the tutelage of Dr. Alex Tanous, a psychologist and theologian from the University of Maine who has experimented with techniques of leaving his body at will and traveling about the world. The reporter’s experiences involved identifying what was on the pages of a magazine neither he nor Dr. Tanous had seen.⁽⁵⁾ Another researcher in this field, Robert Monroe, has not only had out-of-body experiences but also runs an organization to teach (for \$175) others how to have them.⁽⁶⁾ Monroe even reports having had a “spiritual-sexual” experience with a woman in another room while lying in bed with his own wife.⁽⁷⁾ The point is this: Experiences like those which dying patients have, are being induced in perfectly healthy people, entirely unrelated to an after-death state.

(4) In connection with the light which some report seeing, the Christian needs to remember that Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light (**2 Corinthians 11:14**). This is not to imply that all these experiences are Satanically induced, but it is to remind us that there is another possible identification of the light that needs to be added to the list. Most researchers reject a Satanic or demonic explanation on the grounds that those who “come back” always spread the message of love and forgiveness rather than hate and destruction; and Satan, they conclude, would not do this. But that conclusion only shows gross ignorance of Satan’s tactics. Kubler-Ross said something Satanic, not godly, when she expressed the hope that “in the decades to come we may see one universe, one humankind, one religion that unites us all in a peaceful world.”⁽⁸⁾

(5) While certain drugs may produce some of the facets of these near-death experiences, some reported cases involved no drugs or at least no drugs which would be expected to cause psychic effects.

What then is the explanation? There probably is no single answer that would apply in all cases. It is clear that in no case was the person dead in the total sense of that concept. It is clear that if similar experiences can be induced psychologically on healthy persons, the psychological factor is likely the principal key to explain these near-death experiences. Too, one cannot rule out pharmacological, physiological, and neurological factors being intertwined with the psychological.

One final and important consideration: Whether or not Satan is directly (or through demons) involved in such experiences, the Christian needs to ask how Satan might be using all the publicity these reports have been given. He is undoubtedly delighted to have people think about existence after death as long as he can control and slant the content of their thinking. A being of light, the identification of which can be adapted to anybody's religious background; a review of one's earthly life with the assurance of forgiveness and acceptance; the absence of judgment and eternal punishment. All these factors-so prominent in the researchers' reports-fit perfectly with Satan's clear purpose to counterfeit the truth of God's Word.

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