

## Heaven Tourism

~ A. Clair Auker

In 2004, a car accident critically injured 6-year-old Alex Malarkey. After two months he emerged from a coma, permanently paralyzed but with stories of out-of-body experiences and several trips to heaven. A few years later, in 2010, a major evangelical publisher released his story, *The Boy Who Came Back From Heaven: A True Story*, listing Alex and his father as co-authors. The book rose quickly to the bestseller list and sold over a million copies.

Then in January, 2015, the 16-year-old Alex wrote an open letter to Christian publishers and bookstores, stating that he did not die or go to heaven, but had made up the story to get attention. The publisher quickly pulled the book off the market.

This book is only one of many in a genre, often called “heaven tourism,” that has become popular in recent years. Several have sold millions of copies, and some have been made into movies. Typically in these stories someone dies (or at least is thought to be dead) and then miraculously revives to tell of a visit to heaven. A similar book describing a man’s experience in hell also became a bestseller, although not as successful as the more popular of the heaven books.

What should serious Bible believers do with such accounts? Do they belong on our shelves? Should we be surprised when one is declared to be fake? Do we find any support for them in Scripture?

The Bible tells of only a few saints who were privileged to see into heaven and tell what they saw. Micaiah’s glimpse of heaven (2Chron 18:18-22) was a brief prophetic vision, not a death experience. Although Stephen was near death, he was still alive on earth when he saw heaven (Acts 7:55-56); he did not go to heaven and back. Ezekiel, Isaiah, and John wrote more extensive descriptions of heaven (Ezek 1 and 10; Isa 6; Rev 4-6 and 21-22). Again, these were not death experiences but visions of divine revelation to be recorded in the Holy Word.

Paul’s experience of being caught up to the third heaven is instructive (2Cor 12:1-4). It was so real that he did not know if he was in the body or out of the body. Whether he died and came back or simply saw a vision, it was not lawful for him to utter the unspeakable words he heard in paradise. He had no license to build a multi-million-dollar ministry on his sensational story. In fact, he was given a thorn in the flesh to keep him humble about it. Rather than glory in his personal experience, he gloried in the power and cross of Jesus Christ.

The Old and New Testaments tell of several individuals who died and were raised to life, such as Lazarus. Of these, we do not read anything about their heavenly experience, or that they told of it to others.

From these and other Scriptures, we conclude that God has sealed up many details of the future. These are secret things that belong to Him. The things that belong to us are the things He has chosen to reveal (Deut 29:29).

We may also conclude that taking people out of this world and sending them back again is not God’s method of revealing truth about heaven and hell. Jesus, quoting Abraham, tells us why: *“If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead”* (Luke 16:31).

In this statement we notice two pertinent truths. First, a human returning from death with a story would be ineffective; it would not convince the skeptic. Second, God’s written Word is His chosen method for revealing the truth we need to prepare for the life to come.

This brings us to the underlying problem with these back-from-heaven-or-hell books. Are they purporting to convince people that the Bible is true? Or are they claiming to be a new source of divine revelation? Either way, they are built on a premise that has no foundation in Scripture.

Worse, accepting these books as reliable eyewitness accounts opens the door to deception. Where they contradict each other and where they disagree with the Word, which will the reader choose to believe? If we are to reject even an angel from heaven who preaches contrary to revealed truth (Gal 1:8), should we wonder what to do with a human who claims to have returned from heaven?

This is not to judge the motives of these authors. Some may sincerely believe they saw heaven. We are not prepared to categorize each story as imagination, hallucination, or demonic deception. But on the basis of the Word, we cannot accept them as truth.

Do we want to “tour” heaven? First, our robes must be washed and made white in the Blood of the Lamb, and our lives yielded to His lordship. No book—“Christian” or not—should persuade us that someone could bypass the only Way to the Father.

Then for a true picture of heaven, read the heaven passages in God’s Book. Here we have the firsthand account of the best eyewitness, the One who forever dwells in heaven. What better testimony could there be?

Reading and believing the Bible will strengthen our faith and sharpen our vision of heaven, making it more real to us than a story of mere human experience ever could.

In the Bible descriptions of heaven we see a common theme: everyone privileged to glimpse heaven is overwhelmed with the dazzling glory of God that permeates it. If we would see and experience heaven on earth, it must be when *“we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord”* (2 Cor 3:18). As an unknown poet wrote:

*Every morning, lean thine arms awhile  
Upon the windowsill of heaven,  
And gaze upon the Lord.  
Then, with the vision in thy heart,  
Turn strong to meet thy day.*

When we live this way, we have a true story to tell. Not a fantastic story of some novel experience, but the good old Gospel story. Not a story to bring wealth and fame to us, but a story to bring glory to the One who put this treasure into earthen vessels.

Then when by His grace we reach our destination and see His glory, not as in a glass but face to face, the experience will be indescribable in any earthly language. Our stay there will not be transient but eternal, not as tourists but as children in our Father’s house.