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Dr Mark Dooley



MORAL MATTERS

Colton Burpo and the truth about Heaven

RECENTLY, our eldest provoked an interesting discussion around the dinner table. 'What is Heaven like?' he inquired. I was tempted to send him to the Book Of Revelations, in which St John describes in extraordinary detail the celestial dominion. However, before I could say anything, he asked: 'Has anyone ever come back from Heaven?'

Immediately, I recalled that one of my old teachers had died for 20 minutes. A kind-hearted Christian brother, he suffered a heart attack and was clinically dead.

Miraculously, they managed to revive him, but he never spoke about what, if anything, he experienced during those moments.

Others have not been so reticent. There is now a vast empire of 'evidence' from those claiming to have visited Heaven during 'near-death' experiences.

Most survivors report seeing glorious light and long-dead loved ones, whereas others provide vivid detail of eternity.

For example, in 2012, American neurosurgeon Eben Alexander published a bestseller entitled Proof Of Heaven. It tells the story of how, in 2008, he fell into a coma due to a rare form of bacterial meningitis.

His doctors were convinced he could not survive as a result of serious brain damage.

Not only did he survive, but Dr Alexander returned with a tale so astonishing it rocked the medical fraternity of which he was a pillar.

He wrote: 'While beyond my body, I received knowledge about the nature and structure of the universe that was vastly beyond my comprehension... In my past view, spiritual wasn't a word that I would have employed during a scientific conversation. Now I believe it is a word that we cannot afford to leave out.'

Dr Alexander's account of Heaven is not dissimilar from most other reports. It is a place of unimaginable beauty, of timelessness and exquisite colour. There are 'scintillating beings' whose 'silvery bodies' surge with joyful perfection.

What's more, the Creator invariably seems to convey a strikingly similar message of love. According to Dr Alexander, love is 'the reality of realities, the incomprehensible glorious truth of truths that lives and breathes at the core of everything'. In other words, the message of love preached so long ago on the streets of Galilee remains the only law.

As a religious person, I am mindful we don't need near-death testimonies of the afterlife.

We possess the ultimate testimony, that of the Creator Himself. Indeed,

there is nothing in any account of Heaven which is not already revealed in the New Testament.

Yet, it is only natural that we should seek to further our knowledge of what lies beyond the grave.

This explains the phenomenal success of Dr Alexander's book, and a new US box-office sensation dealing with one child's visit to Jesus. Heaven Is For Real is based on a book by the father of Colton Burpo, who, at the age of four, experienced paradise during emergency surgery.

The film recounts how Colton met Jesus and sat on his lap, saw the Virgin Mary and St John the Baptist. It tells of how he spoke with his great-grandfather and miscarried sister, about whom he knew nothing.

Sceptics have criticised the film, saying that because Colton's father was a pastor, the child was heavily conditioned to think of Heaven in such 'Christocentric' terms. Others have condemned the whole thing as a money-making scheme.

I am not so quick to dismiss the testimony of a child. Many of us are enthusiastic enough to believe in visionaries and mystics, without any proof their visions are real. Why, then, are we so reluctant to believe the Creator would choose an innocent child as His instrument?

THE effect of Colton Burpo's story is that many are returning to their faith. Is this because they are overawed by his description of Heaven?

I think it more likely because of the inspiring sermon delivered by Colton's father as the film draws to a close.

'Haven't we already seen Heaven in the first cry of a baby?' Todd Colton asks. Haven't we already seen it in 'the courage of a friend, the hands of a nurse or a doctor, the love of a mother, father? Haven't we already had a glimpse of Heaven, and so often chosen the hell of hate and fear?'

Despite his son's vivid revelations, Todd Colton merely repeats what Christ Himself said: 'The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say "here it is" or "there it is", because the kingdom of God is within you.'

As I told my own son during our dinner-time conversation, we go to extraordinary lengths to prove what we have known for more than two millennia. Our world contains so many intimations of infinity, the most glorious of which is us. Every time we gaze into the eyes of a loved one, we open a window to a realm for which science has no adequate explanation. This may not be definitive proof of Heaven, but it is the best we have this side of eternity.

Rushing to see what lies on the other side only risks obscuring the beautiful miracles already in our midst.

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