

St Paul Lutheran Church Sunday Bible Class

Is "Heaven is for Real" Real?

Introduction

The story is about the 4-year-old son of a Wesleyan pastor in Nebraska who, so his parents believe, visited heaven for three minutes during an emergency surgery to remove his ruptured appendix. The book is another installment in the growing list of books written by or about those who claim to have visited heaven and returned. The book has gained extra credibility among Christians because it is a) written by a Christian pastor, b) exclusively Christian, c) told through the words of a guileless child, and d) because the child spoke of things that his parents believe had not been revealed to him prior to the incident.

While I took pains to approach the book with an open mind, the book disproved itself. While there is a part of every Christian that wants things like visits to heaven and finding Noah's ark to be true (and human beings always tend to believe what they want to be true) Christians need to be both thorough and ruthless in their dismissal of anything and everything that contradicts even one passage of God's Word.

What Was Good

Unlike many other books or accounts of this sort, the book left no doubt that no one gets to heaven *"who doesn't have Jesus in his heart."* All – or nearly all – of the other books or accounts I've read make heaven into the eternal home of all good people, regardless of their relationship to Jesus Christ. They are, in other words, anti-Christian because they are thoroughly work-righteous. The little boy in *"Heaven is for Real"* is adamant that only Christians get to heaven.

The book also seems to promote the vicarious atonement of Jesus Christ, although in very childlike terms that could be misinterpreted: *"Jesus told me he died on the cross so that we could go see his Dad."* (p. 111)

It is also true that God might be able to use this book to reinforce a Christian's focus on the reality of heaven. This is true not so much from the child's account as it is from the Word of God that is fairly extensively referenced.

What Was Not Good

Unfortunately, what was good in *"Heaven is for Real"* is dramatically overshadowed by what is not. First in my mind is the fact that this book, and others like it, become instant source material in the minds of Christians. Christians have one and only one source of truth – God's Word. The Apostle Peter, who was an eye-witness of some of the most spectacular sights ever seen by human eyes – including the transfiguration of Jesus – wrote concerning that event:

2 Peter 1:17-21 *For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,"¹⁸ we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain.¹⁹ And we have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts,²⁰ knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation.²¹ For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.*

God's Word alone is to be trusted implicitly. In all else we need to exercise great caution and wise Christian discernment:

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

Could this little boy have gone to heaven for a time and returned? Couldn't God have done that? Not when he himself has given his word to the contrary. God can't do what he himself has said doesn't happen.

Proverbs 30:4-6 *Who has ascended to heaven and come down? Who has gathered the wind in his fists? Who has wrapped up the waters in a garment? Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is his name, and what is his son's name? Surely you know! ⁵ Every word of God proves true; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him. ⁶ Do not add to his words, lest he rebuke you and you be found a liar.*

John 3:13 *(Jesus said) "No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man."*

Hebrews 9:27-28 *And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, ²⁸ so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.*

When a human being dies and goes to heaven, he doesn't come back. Several human beings in the Bible were raised from the dead – including Lazarus, who was dead for four days – yet not one of them gave an account of what heaven was like. A couple of inspired writers were given *visions* of heaven, but that is much different than visiting and returning. The most notable is the Apostle Paul, who wrote this of his experience:

2 Corinthians 12:2-4 *I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven-- whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. ³ And I know that this man was caught up into paradise--whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows-- ⁴ and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter.*

Note several facts from Paul's God-inspired account. First, he does not claim to have visited heaven ("**...whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows.**") Next note how transcendently spectacular was his experience, so much so that human words could not articulate the experience.

Compare that inspired account to what the boy in *"Heaven is for Real"* claims to have witnessed in heaven:

- 1) Everyone has wings, but some are bigger than others. In fact he was disappointed that his wings weren't bigger – so evidently there will be envy in heaven.
- 2) There are lots of animals in heaven.
- 3) Angels sang to him (The idea that angels sing is man-made. The Bible never says that.)
- 4) Jesus told the boy that "he had to be nice." (p. 56) Evidently then there is still law in heaven.
- 5) Everyone in heaven has a halo
- 6) Everyone has a robe, but there are different colored sashes
- 7) Angels all carry swords, because they have to keep the devil out of heaven (p. 133)
- 8) Jesus wouldn't let the little boy have a sword because he said it was too dangerous (p. 136) Evidently then there is also danger and the possibility of injury in heaven.
- 9) The little boy's daddy will get a sword because the men have to fight the monsters and devils in the final battle. Women and children don't get swords. They have to just watch. (p. 136)
- 10) The Holy Spirit "is kind of blue," while Jesus has green eyes and is "really, really pretty" but masculine

All of this speaks not so much to prevarication but to a child's imagination. The child's parents are convinced of the truth of the boy's account because he reveals things that they never told him. He knew, for example, that mom had a miscarriage (a girl that the boy met in heaven), he knew what his maternal grandfather looked like when he was 29, and he knew aspects of heaven not taught to children of that age in his church's Sunday School curriculum. Every one of these "proofs," however, could be explained by other factors. For example, the parents told the boy's older sister about the miscarriage, and children hear and assimilate much more of what their parents say than parents realize. The boy grew up in a parsonage and accompanied his family to many religion-themed meetings – which means he saw and heard more than his parents could know. Pictures in children's books also profoundly impact a child's imagination.

We also don't know what was redacted from the child's full story. Lynn Vincent, who ghost-wrote *"Heaven is for Real"* on behalf of the young boy and his father, said that she was initially reluctant to include Colton's description of people in heaven having wings. *"If I put that people in Heaven have wings, orthodox Christians are going to think that the book is a hoax."* Although she did include that aspect of the boy's story, the fact that she contemplated redacting that element makes us wonder what else she, or the boy's parents, left out.

Another disturbing element that seems to go unnoticed by those who review the book (both positively and negatively) is the fact that the little boy also seems to have carried special powers with him back to earth. At one point he says he routinely sees *"power shoot down into Daddy"* when he is preaching or teaching a Bible Class, etc. (p. 125) This obviously has nothing to do with his visit to heaven. There is also an account of a rainbow that suddenly appeared, though the author intimated that it hadn't rained, because the boy prayed for it. (p. 109)

The More Serious Problems

1) What's the Point?

This question has been asked by more than one skeptic. What is the point or purpose? Why would God allow such a thing? To convert? To strengthen those who are already Christians? Compare that sort of "proof" – which is no *proof* at all – to what Jesus said:

Matthew 12:39-40 *"An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. ⁴⁰ For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."*

John 20:29 *Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."*

Luke 16:29-31 *But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.' ³⁰ And he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' ³¹ He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.'"*

The first great danger here is modern Christianity's craving to be convinced or even converted by something other than God's Word – as though that Word of God is somehow lacking or deficient for such things; as though it needs to be augmented or supplemented by visions and extra-Biblical revelations.

2) Instant Source Material

The second great danger is the temptation to base what we teach and believe on something other than God's Word. That this sort of error is caused or promoted by books like *"Heaven is for Real"* is undeniable given the line of discussion generated by those who want to defend the book: *"Just because it isn't in the Bible doesn't mean it isn't true. Maybe all Christians do have wings in heaven. And how do you know that Jesus' eyes aren't green and pretty?"*

The problem becomes obvious. The book, rather than the Bible, instantly becomes source material. It becomes the foundation or basis for truth, even in the minds of Christians. Poor Christian art has a long history of this sort of thing, and Christian-based films are now dramatically impacting (confusing) modern Christianity's impression of what is true and what is fictional.

3) Lack of Discernment in the Church

The Christian Church, misled by its leaders, is rapidly losing its discernment – its ability to judge right from wrong *on the basis of God's Word alone*. *Sola Scriptura* is being replaced by gullible sentimentality and provocative imagery. The modern Christian church is seeking the very signs that Jesus condemned in Chorazin and Bethsaida (Matthew 24). It is the Word of God alone that holds the power to convert and strengthen. Once man starts to rely on anything other than God's Word for such things, bad things will always result.

If the world around us rejects Christianity, it must actually be Christianity that we force them to reject. The world can never be allowed to dismiss a form of Christianity based on fanciful human experiences.

4) Heaven will be God-Centered

Another very real problem with *"Heaven is for Real"* and all books like it is that heaven is pictured as man-centered, rather than God-centered. Every Biblical account of man's encounter with God pictures man in abject fear and humility of God's glory and majesty. God's glory is the primary component or element of heaven, yet this book (and all others like it) depict heaven as basically all about man's happiness. Man will certainly be blissfully happy, but that will only be *because* we will exist in the presence of almighty God – who will absolutely dominate that existence. Any purported "visit to heaven" that is not dominated by man's awe at the glory and majesty of God is counterfeit.

Conclusion

While I don't see *"Heaven is for Real"* as an intentional lie, it is hard to regard it as anything but untruth. The fact is we simply don't know what heaven will be like. What we do know is that it far transcends anything that our finite, human, earth-bound minds can now envision. That's undoubtedly why the Bible never attempts to communicate any but the simplest images to us. That is also undoubtedly why Paul found the things that he heard and saw there as inexpressible. The good news is that, as positive as heaven is portrayed in books like *"Heaven is for Real,"* the real heaven will be infinitely more sublime.