

God's Closeness



There's a growing body of literature today that chronicles the experience of persons who were clinically dead for a period of time (minutes or hours) and were medically resuscitated and brought back to life. Many of us, for example, are familiar with Dr. Eben Alexander's book, *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon's Journey into the Afterlife*. More recently Hollywood produced a movie, *Miracles from Heaven*, which portrays the true story of a young Texas girl who was clinically dead, medically revived, and who shares what she experienced in the afterlife.

There are now hundreds of stories like this, gathered through dozens of years, published or simply shared with loved ones. What's interesting (and consoling) is that virtually all these stories are wonderfully positive, irrespective of the person's faith or religious background. In virtually every case their experience, while partially indescribable, was one in which they felt a warm, personal, overwhelming sense of love, light, and welcome, and not a few of them found themselves meeting relatives of theirs that had passed on before them, sometimes even relatives that they didn't know they had. As well, in virtually every case, they did not want to return to life here but, like Peter on the Mountain of the Transfiguration, wanted to stay there.

Recently while speaking at conference, I referenced this literature and pointed out that, among other things, it seems everyone goes to heaven when they die. This, of course, immediately sparked a spirited discussion: "What about hell? Aren't we judged when we die? Doesn't anyone go to hell?" My answer to those questions, which need far more nuance than are contained in a short soundbite, was that while we all go to heaven when we die, depending upon our moral and spiritual disposition, we might not want to stay there. Hell, as Jesus assures us, is a real option; though, as Jesus also assures us, we judge ourselves. God puts no one to hell. Hell is our choice.

However it was what happened after this discussion that I want to share here: A woman approached me

as I was leaving and told me that she had had this exact experience. She had been clinically dead for some minutes and then revived through medical resuscitation. And, just like the experience of all the others in the literature around this issue, she too experienced a wonderful warmth, light, and welcome, and did not want to return to life here on earth. Inside of all of this warmth and love however what she remembers most and most wants to share with others is this: I learned that God is very close. We have no idea how close God is to us. God is closer to us than we ever imagine! Her experience has left her forever branded with a sense of God's warmth, love, and welcome, but what's left the deepest brand of all inside her is the sense of God's closeness.

I was struck by this because, like millions of others, I generally don't feel that closeness, or at least don't feel it very affectively or imaginatively. God can seem pretty far away, abstract and impersonal, a Deity with millions of things to worry about without having to worry about the minutiae of my small life.

Moreover, as Christians, we believe that God is infinite and ineffable. This means that while we can know God, we can never imagine God. Given that truth, it makes it even harder for us to imagine that the infinite Creator

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