

90 MINUTES IN HEAVEN

A TRUE STORY
of DEATH & LIFE

10TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

DON PIPER
WITH CECIL MURPHEY

 **Revell**
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Grand Rapids, Michigan

Don Piper with Cecil Murphey, *90 Minutes in Heaven*
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To the prayer warriors . . .
You prayed; I'm here



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PUBLISHER'S PREFACE *to the* 10TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

In the summer of 2004 Baker Publishing Group released *90 Minutes in Heaven* with a modest first printing of 7500 copies. At the time, Don Piper was an unknown pastor with a bold claim. His book could have generated any type of reaction, including rejection or, more likely, indifference. Few people anticipated a bestseller, at least not openly.

Interest in Don's story developed slowly through word of mouth, until a tipping point arrived one year later. Bookstores sold out and reordered in larger quantities. The title appeared on major bestseller lists and began climbing. As interest grew for *90 Minutes in Heaven*, readers spoke of the impact of Don's story on their lives. They offered their own testimonies about pain, faith, and hope. It seemed that heaven was again on our minds.

From this process one lesson appeared swiftly: Don's experience was extraordinary, but it was not unique. Other people reported similar experiences, but these most recent stories were yet untold. At the time when *90 Minutes in Heaven* appeared, bookstores had not observed much current interest in afterlife

stories, or much eagerness in readers for hearing and sharing those stories.

In the publishing offices, editors have been understandably hesitant about repeating fantastic reports. The reception of *90 Minutes in Heaven* led our profession to revisit that caution. In accepting the risk and responsibility for speaking out, Don Piper created a path for others. His rising profile generated a space—not merely for one book and one story, but for other amazing accounts of near-death experiences. These stories might have remained obscure had not *90 Minutes in Heaven* initiated a wide conversation, and the appearance of all these testimonies is thrilling to witness.

Reporting on near-heaven experiences in *Christianity Today*, editor Mark Galli wrote:

One reason this writer is disposed to believe many of these stories, at least initially, is because they fit with what I as a historian have come to trust as real and true. I was asked a few years ago to moderate a panel in which Don “*90 Minutes in Heaven*” Piper was to participate. After speaking with him before and after the session, and hearing him explain his near-heaven experience during the panel, I was struck with this thought: *Piper is a reliable, trustworthy witness. . . .* As a Christian who believes there is more to this existence than the material, I do not dismiss out of hand the possibility of someone having an extraordinary heavenly experience. All manner of miracles have happened and continue to happen in our world. But a lot depends on the trustworthiness of the individual involved. And Piper simply had the look and sound of sanity, of someone who was telling the truth, whose word was his bond.¹

A second lesson concerns hope. The popularity of Don’s story reflects the urgency of hope, and that this hope comes from God and his promises. “Be not afraid,” the Bible tells us over and over.

The promise of heavenly hope does not ignore the weight of our burdens here on earthly ground. Readers of *90 Minutes in Heaven* have observed that Don describes his physical suffering as vividly as he does his heavenly encounter. This mingling of pain, joy, and hope mimics our own experiences and observations, and *90 Minutes in Heaven* would be easier to dismiss if not for this balance. An encouragement to “be not afraid” carries more influence when it comes from a person who has faced trauma as frightful as any human might experience. There is nothing flippant about Don’s hope in heaven and in the injuries he endured to obtain that vision. This opportunity killed him. Literally.

Both celestial and messy, Don’s testimony is widely accepted because it reflects the gospel promise for us today. At Lake Livingston, Texas, in January 1989, God performed a miracle. This story connects us to God’s mysterious activity in our own lives and stories. It offers a promise of what is to come. As the publisher and a companion of Don Piper, participating in this conversation is our greatest privilege. We place this story in your hands as an invitation to hope.

Dwight Baker
President
Baker Publishing Group

A PERSONAL UPDATE FROM DON PIPER

The years slip by so briskly. It's been twenty-five years since my fatal accident on a lonely bridge on a cold, rainy, east Texas morning. Yet some days when the piercing pain revisits me, it seems as if that crash happened yesterday.

Fourteen years following those momentous events on the bridge, I released the chronicle of that ordeal in a book called *90 Minutes in Heaven: A True Story of Death & Life*.

The first sentence in the “Acknowledgments” section of that book's first edition is, “I wrote this book in self-defense.”

I must say today as I write this update for the 10th anniversary edition, I do so “in utter amazement!” rather than in self-defense. The enormous commercial and spiritual success of my book defies any sort of conventional wisdom. Many have said, and I agree, that the deeply emotional responses and subsequent phenomenal sales must be a “God thing.” What other explanation makes any sense?

Consider that the book in its various forms has now sold over six million copies in forty-six languages! Since its release

in August 2004, it is one of the most successfully selling books in print in any language. And this from a book that initially had a first printing of 7500 copies! Prior to this 10th anniversary edition, the paperback edition of *90 Minutes in Heaven* is in its eighty-second printing!

Indeed, what an awesome journey it has been since August 2004, when our church receptionist called my office and said, “Don, you have a package at the front desk.”

The furthest thing from my mind as I passed by her desk later was that the package could be my first copy of *90 Minutes in Heaven*. Chills ran down my spine as I pulled my very own book out of its shipping envelope. Wow!

Since that auspicious day, I have . . .

Traveled just short of two million miles sharing the *90 Minutes in Heaven* testimony with over three thousand live audiences. A conservative estimate of the number of souls who have heard me speak in person is over one and a half million, from all over the world. I have personally autographed over a quarter of a million copies of *90 Minutes*.

The *90 Minutes in Heaven* story was shared in a tent in Husbondliden, Sweden; near the Artic Circle in Lapland, Finland; in the War Memorial Convention Hall in Lihue, Kauai; in Talkeetna, Alaska, in the shadow of Mt. Denali; on a ship off the coast of Malta; at Capital Baptist Church in Mexico City; in Moncton, New Brunswick; at a church in Paris, France; in San Juan, Puerto Rico; from the pulpit of First Baptist in Maryville, Illinois, where the pastor was murdered while preaching three weeks before; with the “Yoopers” in Marquette, Michigan; at a supper club in Leicester, England; in Bumpass, Virginia; on a fjord in Norway; in an Amish barn; in Bavaria; and in a town that actually bills itself as the “middle of nowhere,” Ainsworth, Nebraska.

The great commission stipulates that we should take the gospel to the ends of the earth. While I haven’t quite accomplished

that daunting task, I have made a dent in it. Having preached in many countries and all fifty US states, I am very aware of how different we are and yet how much we are alike.

All this traveling has led me to stay in an incredible variety of accommodations: Over a thousand hotels (from five stars to minus-five stars), sleeping under everything from silk sheets to sheets with holes in them. Hyatts, Hiltons, Hamptons, Holiday Inns, La Quintas, Marriotts, Days Inns, Comfort Inns, and dozens of bed and breakfasts. I've also stayed in lodges, camps, dormitories, a hut called an *ubetjent* in Norway, an abandoned college, rental houses, and cars (yes, we've slept in cars). I have been honored to spend nights in private homes. My son Chris and I even spent the night at the guest quarters of a nunnery across from Mount St. Mary's University where I was a guest speaker. Yes, we ate breakfast with dozens of sisters in habits. For a few moments I actually felt like I was in an old Bing Crosby movie.

Therefore, you won't be surprised to know that I am a member of virtually every frequent flier, guest rewards, and rental car frequent rewards program in existence. All that really means is that I travel constantly. Besides flying every week, I have a Chevy Tahoe with 150,000 miles of speaking engagement trips on it—and it's my second car since I started sharing the *90 Minutes* story!

I've been in Opels, Mercedes, Isuzus, SEATs (a Spanish vehicle), Citroens, Fiats, Volvos—all of them rental cars. There have been minivans, SUVs, tiny sedans, trucks, taxis, and vehicles driven by volunteers sent to pick us up. Several times we've driven all night in order to be at a venue for a breakfast speaking engagement the next morning.

In the course of all these miles (and this is an astounding fact), I have never missed a scheduled ministry event, though we did have a couple of postponements due to inclement weather.

In the course of ministering in Jesus' name I have spoken in ancient cathedrals, church auditoriums, fellowship halls, historical churches, hysterical churches, civic centers, school auditoriums, shopping malls, banquet halls, a cornfield in South Dakota, campgrounds, open-air pavilions, an Amish barn, a bathroom (actually an underground dorm/shower/bathroom complex into which we were herded along with faculty and students during a tornado warning at Cedarville University in Ohio), assisted living centers, and tents both large and small.

There will be no denominations in heaven. I often say, "In heaven, nothing divides us." On earth I have spoken to congregations of Methodists, Episcopalians, Assemblies of God, Lutherans, Catholics, Baptists, Mennonites, Amish groups, Presbyterians, Wesleyans, Anglicans, African Methodist Episcopal, Reformed groups, Congregationalists, Brethren, Pentecostals, Nazarenes, Missionary Alliance groups, Church of God groups, Bible churches, Independents, charismatics, non-denominational groups, Messianic groups, and Evangelical Free groups.

It has been my honor to share with students at middle schools, high schools, and dozens of colleges and universities, both private and public.

I have been the keynote speaker at pastors' retreats, women's retreats, youth camps, and Christian conferences from Honolulu to Mackinac Island.

We've flown to the top of Alaska's twenty-thousand-foot Mt. Denali and spoken at fifty feet below sea level in El Centro, California.

Remarkably, we've heard our hosts excitedly say, "We've never had this many people come to our church (or event) before." Indeed, there have been incredible numbers of record crowds. There have been several occasions when more people were seated outside the main auditorium than inside, simply because they couldn't get in!

I told a couple of pastors over these years, “Don’t look up at the ceiling. They may be lowering folks through the roof at any minute.”

Hosts have distracted many fire marshals in order to complete an event. A pastor in Sweden exclaimed, “Dear Lord, no one has ever sat in our balcony before tonight!” A pastor in Illinois remarked after a particularly anointed event, “We haven’t had this many folks in here since we had the mayor’s funeral.” Audiences from one hundred to one hundred thousand filed in, day in and day out. Our God is an awesome God.

Along the way, it has been my distinct privilege to share the platform with some of this era’s finest spiritual leaders, including J. I. Packer, Donald Miller, Gary Chapman, Tony Campolo, Randy Alcorn, Francis Chan, Bill Wiese, Kathy Tricoli, Auntie Anne (Beiler), Philip Yancey, Jennifer O’Neill, William P. Young, David Meece, Barry McGuire, Phil Munsey, Pat Boone, and so many others.

I have spoken following such diverse special music as Native American drums, Hula dancers, and an Elvis impersonator in Las Vegas. I have heard the song “I Can Only Imagine,” by MercyMe no less than one thousand times and “What a Friend We Have in Jesus,” a million times. (Well, maybe only 999,000.)

From the beginning I vowed never to discriminate in response to speaking invitations. So, since the first book’s release, I have shared with such utterly diverse groups as the Nebraska Concrete Paving Convention, the Communication Corporation, a Louisiana Oil Marketer’s Convention, the Christian Legal Society of Hawaii, a Navajo Tribal Elder Meeting at the Sandia Resort Casino, the Rawhide Boys Ranch, a Sioux powwow at Ft. Peck Reservation, a Chiropractors convention, the NYC Learning Annex in Manhattan, a Real Estate Brokers meeting, the Disc Jockeys of America in Las Vegas, Kiwanis meetings, Lions meetings, mayors’ prayer breakfasts, the governor

of Iowa's prayer breakfast, college alumni meetings, the Billy Graham Chapel at the Louisiana State Penitentiary (Angola), the Halawa Correctional Facility in Hawaii, prisons all over Texas, juvenile correctional facilities, rehabilitation facilities, to terminally ill patients all over the country, a paralyzed football player, and dozens of Ilizarov patients.

Elaborate and simple introductions have preceded my ministry opportunities. From "here's the dead guy," to an introduction by Christian contemporary band Tenth Avenue North, who said, "Don Piper's coming out to speak. He's stinking awesome!"

Thousands of media interviews for TV, radio, magazines, and newspapers have interspersed ministry events. I am honored to have been interviewed by Bob Woodruff, Bill O'Reilly, Pat Robertson, Gordon Robertson, Sean Hannity, Morris Cerullo, Jan Crouch, Kerry Shook, Jim Burns, Paula White, Phil Munsey, D. James Kennedy, and Pat Boone, among many others. In addition to US media outlets, I've been invited to appear on God TV Europe, the BBC, Scottish TV, Australian TV, Swedish TV, Norwegian TV, Canadian TV, and 100 Huntley Street in Ontario.

At the onset of this response to *90 Minutes in Heaven*, I formed a 501 3C non-profit ministry. It's been my intention to use the revenue from book sales, offerings, and honoraria to benefit those who have little visible means of support. Sales of this book have benefited ministries all over the world. These profits have allowed me to go to Joplin, Missouri, after the horrific tornado, Louisiana after hurricane Isaac, Kentucky after an airliner crash, Virginia after the Virginia Tech murders, and dozens of other places suffering the aftermath of catastrophes and crises.

It's been a joy and privilege to raise many thousands of dollars in donations during fundraisers for schools, prisons, handicapped adults and children, senior adult living facilities, and many others. Thousands of books have been donated to prison ministries, libraries, churches, grief support groups, and military

and hospital chaplains. *90 Minutes in Heaven* is now used as a teaching tool for hospital staffs, mortuaries, grief support workers, and first responders.

A seven-part DVD teaching series based on the book was recorded in Franklin, Tennessee, and has been used as curriculum for discipleship training from coast to coast.

One of my most vivid memories of my trip to heaven is the music. *90 Minutes in Heaven* has inspired several songs. Since its release I have received lyrics and music to numerous compositions inspired by my book. A complete album of songs about our story, called *Heaven Is Real*, was recorded by Nashville recording artists Nash 3.



My friend and coauthor, Cec Murphey, and I have written three more books together, and he has also coauthored a book with my wife, Eva. Our agent, Deidre Knight, is not just a consummate media professional but has become a dear friend to us all. Dr. Vicki Crumpton, the acquiring editor of *90 Minutes*, has guided this book every step of the way and shares much of the credit for its publication and content. My friends at Speak Up Speaker Services have seen to it that I haven't had a day off for eight years now. Well, not quite. Shirley Liechty and Carol and Gene Kent of SUSS are wonderful folks who not only schedule the vast majority of my speaking engagements but have become true friends as well.

This humble tome remains a testimony to the faith of Cec, our fearless agent Deidre, Vicki, and the other members of the awesome team at Baker Publishing Group's Revell division including publicist Suzanne Cross Burden, Twila Bennett, Karen Steele, Marilyn Gordon, and company president Dwight Baker.

This journey has not been solo. The Board of Directors of Don Piper Ministries has been indispensable, as we have sought

to carry out the ministry's mission. The late chairman of the board, David Gentiles, and board members Rev. Cliff McArdle, Dr. Mark Forrest, Rev. Sonny Steed, and Eldon Pentecost have prayerfully paved the way for all our efforts. My son Chris has traveled at least a million of those travel miles with me. Scott Flenniken has helped in shipping and receiving and is director of our ministry efforts. And just as my wife, Eva, has been the hero of our story while we found our new normal, she has also supported my travel and outreach every step of the way.

Here are some of her observations about the events since the release of *90 Minutes*:

As I've traveled with Don over the past nine years, there are two questions I'm almost always asked: "Are you *the wife*?" and "Do you ever get tired of hearing Don's testimony?"

To the first I answer, "Yes, I am," which reminds me how lucky we are to still have Don with us. Watching the evidence of how God is using such a horrific experience to bring a message of hope to people around the world makes me proud to be "the wife."

The answer to the second question is no. I never tire of hearing his story. More importantly I love watching the faces of people who are hearing it for the first time. It is an awesome and humbling experience. At the book table I've had the privilege of listening to those who share how much Don's story means to them, and how it gives them a sense of hope and encouragement. I've seen the smiles and the tears. I've felt the hugs.

Through the ministry of *90 Minutes* I've met more of my Christian family, those with whom I will spend eternity. The book's success has presented its own set of challenges—frequent separations as Don travels, celebrating many holidays in different time zones, and living with a hallway full of book boxes.

I continue to be amazed with the response. It just proves how God can take something horrific and use it for his glory. This "wife" is honored to be a part of that. No matter where Don is

in the world he will call every night at 10 o'clock. Even though he's not home, I know he's doing what he is called to do.

And my son Chris truly “fought the good fight and ran the good race” as he served with me on the firing line of faith. Here's his take on the *90 Minutes* phenomena:

It's quite strange to think that my father's accident would precipitate not one but two life-altering episodes for the Pipers. Understandably, the catastrophic physical injuries Dad sustained in the collision, and the emotional toll they took on him and all who cared for him, forever altered the dynamic of our family. If you're reading this book, you're likely familiar with the story described on television shows, on radio programs, in magazines, in newspapers, and documented at least a thousand times on YouTube.

Through much frustration, tenacity, patience, and prayer, all of us processed the accident in our own way and, as we humans tend to do, assimilated the lessons we learned into our everyday lives. When Dad mentioned that Revell decided to publish the book, we were very glad that more people would have an opportunity to hear the story. At the time, it was significant only because someone, or the several someones who made the decision to take on this project, thought this episode was worth recording and recounting.

When the book came out, and immediately began to garner attention from enthusiastic readers and media alike, we were excited that God had revealed a purpose in one of the more painful periods our family had endured. After Dad left his position at our home church to devote more time to giving his testimony, we began to notice a new energy in him that had been lost or hidden by years of physical pain and repressed emotional hurt. If you truly are as young as you feel, Dad was half his age.

There comes a time, however, when the enthusiasm over a new endeavor and the stresses associated with that endeavor intersect. Dad would come home from one of his two-hundred-plus

events a year fulfilled and exhausted—processing the dozens of stories he'd heard from people who felt like he could understand their pain because of his own. You don't forget the faces of the people who tell you about a recently lost loved one, a terminal illness, physical abuse, chemical dependency, etc., when you try to sleep at night. I don't think Dad was doing much sleeping.

So when he asked me to assist him with running the ministry, I agreed to do so only after a lot of prayer and counsel. He was juggling more invitations than he could possibly answer along with making travel arrangements, shipping books, fielding appearance requests, and allocating funds from speaking and book sales to dozens of charities around the world.

I tried to keep up with him as he trekked around the world sharing the gospel through the lens of his testimony. I have endured long security lines, food poisoning because of late-night eats from questionable establishments, and harrowing routes through treacherous roadways because of faulty GPS devices. I have seen the incredible beauty of God's creation and the wonders of the world . . . half the time on the way to an airport. I have held the hands of people dying from cancer and fed homeless people shrimp cocktail and cheesecake under a bridge in Portland, Oregon.

I have seen hearts healed because they heard, in person, about the incredible grace bestowed on us by a loving God. I have been part of worship so moving that the windows of heaven opened and everything shimmered like gold. I have witnessed that holy moment when someone embraces Christ for the very first time.

I have yelled at my father with such intensity that the walls of our hotel room shook. I have hugged him with such sincerity that I felt like a little boy again. For six years, I devoted my life to this great purpose, one only a sovereign God could ordain.

Although I have recently taken a more limited role in my father's ministry, I am still so thankful for the time spent making sure he got to the right place at the right time and knowing what hotel to check into afterward. I suppose it could be said that Dad's accident defined my childhood, and this great journey

over the last half-decade defined me as a man. I have been blessed and honored to play a part in the *90 Minutes* story as it unfolded and as it continues to unfold.



Never among our most ambitious hopes was the prospect that *90 Minutes in Heaven* would achieve the sort of amazing reach and impact that it has had. More books and millions of miles traveled to be in front of millions of people have followed. As astounding as those facts are, the real joy for me is the thousands of dollars we have been able to share with those in need worldwide. It's the visits that I've had with those recovering from tragedy and loss, especially those wearing external fixators. It's meeting people who I have prayed for on previous visits who are brought to meet me on subsequent visits. And the words, "See, we prayed and now they can walk on their own."

But above all, it's the thousands of souls I have seen come to Christ after reading the book or hearing the testimony. Men, women, boys, and girls who email me, call me, share with me at a book signing table or walk forward during an altar call to say, "I've just trusted the Lord as Savior!" Praise God!

In 2004, when I wrote my acknowledgments I penned words that ring even more true today: "Lord, I haven't always understood the whys of what happened, but I never stopped trusting you. I pray, Abba Father, that this humble effort to tell my story pleases you and blesses many. Amen."

I can say without reservation: my prayer has been answered! Just as the prayers of those who prayed for me that rainy day on the way to church were answered.

Predictably and poignantly, some of those whom I thanked in the preface to the first edition have now joined my welcoming committee in heaven; my father, Ralph Piper, my dear friend David Gentiles, and my mother-in-law, Ethel Pentecost. But I know where they are!

The Why Questions

The final chapter of *90 Minutes in Heaven* is entitled, “The Why Questions.” Why did this happen to me? Was it because I was a skeptic about people who said they died and saw heaven and came back to tell about their experiences? I can now answer that question once and for all.

In these twenty-five years since my own experience, I have heard dozens of utterly sincere people share strikingly similar stories about their own deaths and heaven experiences. Exhilarating to me is the fact that not one of these individuals emerged from his or her experience without becoming a Christian, if they had not already been a Christ-follower! Conversely, I have had a few sincere souls relate (understandably) very privately that they had experienced a hellish torment at death. Again, whether they were believers in Christ before or not, they emerged from their respective traumas as true followers of Christ. Every one of them!

Perhaps one of the reasons that I had my death, visit to the gates of heaven, and grueling recovery trial is so that others could know that they were not alone in their experiences. I’m more than okay with that now. Not so much before that original book was released.

I asked, “Did God want me to know how real pain could feel so that I could understand the pain of others?” Ten years later I would answer unequivocally, “Yes!” Many thousands of people have told me so. I am absolutely humbled and deeply honored to do so. God knows that I looked for someone to understand and empathize when I wore the first femur external fixator and endured thirty-four surgeries and two years of rehabilitation. And God said to me, *you will become that person*. What a humbling privilege!

I also asked, “Did God want me to know how real heaven is?” Today I would say, “Without a doubt!” Since the book’s

release, how many hands of terminally ill folks have I held as I shared with them the reality and promise of heaven? How many invitations have I extended for people to make a reservation in heaven through Christ and Christ alone? How many funerals have I conducted since my own death, reminding mourners that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord for those who truly know him? I know heaven is real, and we're taking reservations today!

My final question in that first book was, "How can my experiences of death, heaven, and a long period of recovery benefit others?" First, I was knocked down, but not out. It is a question of learning to be not bitter, but better, and different.

Second, I live because of answered prayer. I had nothing to do with my coming back that day. Many thousands of prayers were launched on my behalf and God said yes! And here I am!

Third, only many miracles of God could have saved me that day and allowed me to walk as I now do. Shattered legs and a tattered arm are now restored. Brain damage and internal injuries vanished. God is still in the miracle business in the twenty-first century. I am living proof of that.

And finally, I stood there at the gates of heaven that day, more alive and complete than I have ever been here on earth. I was surrounded by those who had preceded me in death and who had helped me get to heaven by their words and actions. This remains the most real experience of my entire existence. Though I chose to keep it a sacred secret for a while, I now happily and without reservation shout, "Heaven is real and Jesus is the Way!"

I did ask a lot of questions at the end of the original book. On the occasion of my book's tenth anniversary I would say that the answer to all of them is Jesus, Jesus, and Jesus! He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life!

If this is your first time to read my simple book, I humbly ask that you consider Christ. Talking about overcoming, miracles, prayer, and heaven won't get you to heaven . . . only Jesus will.

It would be a distinct honor to meet each of you here on earth. But there are a lot of you and only one of me. So I say, that if I don't meet you here, I long to see you there . . . at the gate!

Don Piper
April 2014

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wrote this book in self-defense. In the years since 1989 I have seldom satisfied anyone with quick answers or brief encounters retelling my experiences. On radio, on TV, in newspapers, and from countless pulpits and other speaking engagements, I have generally left more unanswered questions than satisfactory responses. People consistently have wanted to know more . . . always more. I wrote three different manuscripts about this experience to satisfy inquiring minds. None of them satisfied me. That's when I prevailed upon one of America's distinguished authors to partner with me to write a book that would answer the most compelling issues concerning my death and life. Cecil Murphey, author of very successful biographies of such luminaries as Franklin Graham, Truett Cathey, B. J. Thomas, Dino Karsanakas, and Dr. Ben Carson, gave me the perspective I wanted to write the book I needed to write. You're holding it now.

Cec has become a devoted friend, confidant, and mentor. Indeed, one of the blessings of writing this book has been to know Cec Murphey. His passion for this project is felt on every

page. Thank you, Cec! You are deeply appreciated. Likewise, the Knight Agency's Deidre Knight's belief in this project is much appreciated. And Dr. Vicki Crumpton of Baker Publishing Group is a person I have grown to admire. Her dedication to seeing this story in print is cherished.

I want to thank the staff of both Memorial Hermann Medical Center's Trauma Unit and St. Luke's Episcopal Hospital in Houston for their devotion to the healing arts. Special thanks to Dr. Thomas Greider, my orthopedic surgeon since that fateful night of January 18, 1989.

Precious people of God from many churches have allowed me to serve them. Not only were their prayers crucial to my survival but their presence has been a blessing to my ministry. Deep gratitude goes to South Park Baptist Church of Alvin, Texas, God's great prayer warriors. I would like to acknowledge the special contributions of First Baptist Church, Airline Baptist Church, and Barksdale Baptist Church, all of Bossier City, Louisiana. My father in the ministry, Dr. Damon V. Vaughn, former pastor of the first two of those churches is owed an immeasurable debt.

For standing faithfully with me in the days since my accident I express undying love for the First Baptist Church of Rosharon, Texas, along with Hunters' Glen Church and Murphy Road Baptist Church of Plano, Texas. Since 1996 I have called First Baptist Church of Pasadena, Texas, my place of service. Your support for this project has been sweet and unwavering. Thank you all for your patience, forbearance, prayers, and love.

To Anita Onerecker and her late husband, Dick, thank you for allowing God to use you so dramatically. To all my friends, brothers and sisters in Christ, who prayed so passionately, I thank you. Only God knows your sacrifices and kindnesses. Most of all, I thank my friends of many years, Cliff McArdle and David Gentiles, true gifts from God. Whether day or night, convenient or imposition, expedient or sacrificial, you have always

been faithful. And thank you all for encouraging me to see this book to fruition.

Finally, I want to express profound gratitude to my wife's parents, Eldon and Ethel Pentecost, and my own parents, Ralph and Billie Piper, for their incalculable sacrifices and faithful support. To my three children, Nicole, Chris, and Joe, I say . . . God has given me children so much better than I could have ever deserved. I am highly blessed. How can I say thank you for all you have meant to me, even more so since that Wednesday so long ago? And to my wife of thirty years, Eva, no one should ever have had to do the things you've had to do for me. But you did them, faithfully, compassionately, and without hesitation. Of all my family and friends, only Eva comes closest to really knowing how painful this journey has been each day, for she has endured it with me. Eva, you are a gift from God.

Lord, you know I haven't always understood the whys of what has happened, but I've never stopped trusting you. I pray, Abba Father, that this humble effort to tell my story pleases you and blesses many. Amen.

Don Piper
February 2004

PROLOGUE

I died on January 18, 1989.

Paramedics reached the scene of the accident within minutes. They found no pulse and declared me dead. They covered me with a tarp so that onlookers wouldn't stare at me while they attended to the injuries of the others. I was completely unaware of the paramedics or anyone else around me.

Immediately after I died, I went straight to heaven.

While I was in heaven, a Baptist preacher came on the accident scene. Even though he knew I was dead, he rushed to my lifeless body and prayed for me. Despite the scoffing of the Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs), he refused to stop praying.

At least ninety minutes after the EMTs pronounced me dead, God answered that man's prayers.

I returned to earth.

This is my story.



1

THE ACCIDENT

That is why we can say with confidence,
“The Lord is my helper,
so I will not be afraid.
What can mere mortals do to me?”
Hebrews 13:6

The Baptist General Convention of Texas (BGCT) holds annual statewide conferences. In January 1989, they chose the north shore of Lake Livingston where the Union Baptist Association, composed of all Baptist churches in the greater Houston area, operates a large conference center called Trinity Pines. The conference focused on church growth, and I went because I was seriously considering starting a new church.

The conference started on Monday and was scheduled to end with lunch on Wednesday. On Tuesday night, I joined a BGCT executive and friend named J. V. Thomas for a long walk. J. V. had become a walker after his heart attack, so we exercised together the last night of the conference.

Months earlier, I had begun thinking that it was time for me to start a new congregation. Before embarking on such a venture, I wanted as much information as I could get. I knew that J. V. had as much experience and knowledge about new church development as anyone in the BGCT. Because he had started many successful churches in the state, most of us recognized him as the expert. As we walked together that night, we talked about my starting a new church, when to do it, and where to plant it. I wanted to know the hardships as well as the pitfalls to avoid. He answered my seemingly endless questions and raised issues I hadn't thought about.

We walked and talked for about an hour. Despite the cold, rainy weather, we had a wonderful time together. J. V. remembers that time well.

So do I, but for a different reason: It would be the last time I would ever walk normally.



On Wednesday morning the weather worsened. A steady rain fell. Had the temperature been only a few degrees colder, we couldn't have traveled, because everything would have been frozen.

The morning meetings started on time. The final speaker did something Baptist preachers almost never do—he finished early. Instead of lunch, the staff at Trinity Pines served us brunch at about ten thirty. I had packed the night before, so everything was stowed in my red 1986 Ford Escort.

As soon as we finished brunch, I said good-bye to all my friends and got into my car to drive back to the church where I was on staff, South Park Baptist Church in Alvin, a Houston bedroom community.

When I started the engine, I remembered that only three weeks earlier I had received a traffic ticket for not wearing a seat belt. I had been on my way to preach for a pastor friend who was

going to have throat surgery. A Texas trooper had caught me. That ticket still lay on the passenger seat, reminding me to pay it as soon as I returned to Alvin. Until I received the ticket, I had not usually worn a seat belt, but after that I changed my ways.

When I looked at that ticket I thought, *I don't want to be stopped again*. So I carefully fastened my seat belt. That small act would be a crucial decision.

There were two ways to get back to Houston and on to Alvin. As soon as I reached the gates of Trinity Pines, I had to choose either to drive through Livingston and down Highway 59 or to head west to Huntsville and hit I-45, often called the Gulf Freeway. Each choice is probably about the same distance. Every other time to and from Trinity Pines I had driven Highway 59. That morning I decided to take the Gulf Freeway.

I was relieved that we had been able to leave early. It was only a few minutes after 11:00, so I could get back to the church by 2:00. The senior minister had led a group to the Holy Land and left me responsible for our midweek service at South Park Church. He had also asked me to preach for the next two Sundays. That night was a prayer meeting, which required little preparation, but I needed to work on my sermon for the following Sunday morning.

Before I left Alvin, I had written a draft for the first sermon titled "I Believe in a Great God." As I drove, I planned to glance over the sermon and evaluate what I had written so far.

Many times since then I've thought about my decision to take the Gulf Freeway. It's amazing how we pay no attention to simple decisions at the time they're made. Yet I would remind myself that even the smallest decisions often hold significant consequences. This was one of those choices.

I pulled out of Trinity Pines, turned right, and headed down Texas Highway 19. That would take me to Huntsville and intersect with I-45, leading to Houston. I didn't have to drive far

before I reached Lake Livingston, a man-made lake, created by damming the Trinity River. What was once a riverbed is now a large, beautiful lake. Spanning Lake Livingston is a two-lane highway whose roadbed has been built up above the level of the lake. The road has no shoulders, making it extremely narrow. I would have to drive across a long expanse of water on that narrow road until I reached the other side. I had no premonitions about the trip, although I was aware of the road's lack of shoulders.

At the end of the highway across the lake is the original bridge over the Trinity River. Immediately after the bridge, the road rises sharply, climbing the bluff above the Trinity's riverbed. This sharp upturn makes visibility a problem for drivers in both directions.

This was my first time to see the bridge, and it looked curiously out of place. I have no idea of the span, but the bridge is quite long. It's an old bridge with a massive, rusty steel superstructure. Other than the immediate road ahead, I could see little, and I certainly didn't glimpse any other traffic. It was a dangerous bridge, and as I would learn later, several accidents had occurred on it. (Although no longer used, the bridge is still there. The state built another one beside it.)

I drove at about fifty miles an hour because it was, for me, uncharted territory. I braced my shoulders against the chill inside the car. The wind made the morning seem even colder than it was. The steady rain had turned into a cloudburst. I would be happy to finally reach Alvin again. About 11:45 a.m., just before I cleared the east end of the bridge, an eighteen-wheeler driven by an inmate, a trusty at the Texas Department of Corrections, weaved across the center line and hit my car head-on. The truck sandwiched my small car between the bridge railing and the driver's side of the truck. All those wheels went right on top of my car and smashed it.

I remember parts of the accident, but most of my information came from the accident report and people at the scene.

From the description I've received from witnesses, the truck then veered off to the other side of the narrow bridge and side-swiped two other cars. They were in front of the truck and had already passed me going in the opposite direction. The police record says that the truck was driving fast—at least sixty miles an hour—when it struck my car. The inexperienced driver finally brought the truck to a stop almost at the end of the bridge.

A young Vietnamese man was in one vehicle that was hit, and an elderly Caucasian man was in the other. Although shaken up, both drivers suffered only minor cuts and bruises. They refused help, so the paramedics transported neither man to the hospital.

Because of the truck's speed, the accident report states that the impact was about 110 miles an hour. That is, the truck struck me while going sixty miles an hour, and I was carefully cruising along at fifty. The inmate received a citation for failure to control his vehicle and speeding. Information later came out that the inmate wasn't licensed to drive the truck. At the prison, supervisors had asked for volunteers to drive their truck to pick up food items and bring them back. Because he was the only volunteer, they let him drive their supply truck. Two guards followed close behind him in another state-owned pickup.

After the accident, the truck driver didn't have a scratch on him. The prison truck received little damage. However, the heavy vehicle had crushed my Ford and pushed it from the narrow road. Only the bridge railing stopped my car from going into the lake.

According to those who were at the scene, the guards called for medical backup from the prison, and they arrived a few minutes later. Someone examined me, found no pulse, and declared that I had been killed instantly.

I have no recollection of the impact or anything that happened afterward.

In one powerful, overwhelming second, I died.