# RANDYKAY

FOREWORD BY JOHN BURKE

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF IMAGINE HEAVEN

# TOMEET JESUS

HOW ENCOUNTERING HEAVEN
CHANGED MY LIFE



# DYING TOMEET JESUS

HOW ENCOUNTERING HEAVEN
CHANGED MY LIFE

RANDY KAY



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This book is dedicated to all those in the midst of suffering. You are loved more than you can possibly comprehend. I know.

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## Foreword

ver the last thirty years, I have studied over one thousand cases of people who have clinically died yet revived. In some cases, their hearts stopped beating, even brainwaves had ceased, yet they were resuscitated and came back to declare the wonders of the life to come. What Randy shares of his own experience when a pulmonary embolism caused his clinical death (and Randy has proof he actually died) lines up with many of the commonalities of these near-death experiences I have studied. Millions have had similar experiences to Randy's. The Gallup Poll declared that 1 in 25 Americans has had a near-death experience. Yet just as Randy was hesitant to share his sacred time with Jesus, others find it difficult to talk about as well.

Imagine if our lives were being lived out on a flat, twodimensional, black-and-white painting. Death is when your spirit separates from this life, so imagine your spirit torn off that flat painting and brought out into a three-dimensional room of color containing the black-and-white picture. Suddenly you come alive in new dimensions and experience colors you have never seen. From this new perspective, you can see your flat-painting world as a part of a bigger reality. Then imagine being "brought back" to two-dimensional life on that painting. How would you describe a third dimension of colors in two-dimensional, black-and-white words? I am convinced that is what people who have near-death experiences struggle to do—explain heaven's extradimensional reality in limited 3D words.

As a Christian pastor, my interest in near-death experiences is to understand how they line up with what the Bible has already revealed about the life to come, and to help people better know how to live life now in line with God's purpose. But I was once a skeptic and agnostic. I was not a believer when my dad was dying of cancer. A friend gave him the first book on this well-hidden, pervasive phenomenon, *Life After Life*. It was the book that coined the term "near-death experience." I read it in one night and thought, *Oh, my gosh, this God stuff and Jesus stuff may be real, and if so, it's the most important thing in life*. The next year, I joined a Bible study, where I came to faith in Jesus, understanding for the first time the free gift of forgiveness and eternal life offered by God's grace.

So after thirty years of studying the Bible, in seminary and as a pastor, and at the same time studying over one thousand of these near-death experiences, I wrote *Imagine Heaven* to show how these testimonies add color to the picture of the life to come already revealed in the Bible. And that is what I so appreciate about Randy's story and the biblical insights he shares. Randy's story aligns with many of the commonalities of the experiences I have studied, yet his journey is also unique in several ways.

First, sharing his story could cost Randy considerably. As Randy and I sat at lunch overlooking the pristine San Diego harbor near his home, he said to me and my son, "Publishing this book could be the end of my career. But I feel it's what God wants me to do." Randy writes about his encounter with Jesus in heaven while serving as the CEO of a successful company, which should not be taken lightly.

I have studied and interviewed doctors, professors, commercial airline pilots, bank presidents and others whose near-death experiences line up with Randy's story. What possible motivation could Randy or these people have for making up a wild tale of dying and seeing heaven, even meeting God? Why would successful professionals make up such similar stories? I can find no good reason, except it happened.

I was an engineer before becoming a pastor, so I am interested in the analytical evidence of heaven's reality that these modern-day medical miracles reveal. I believe they provide scientific evidence of the afterlife. The fact that Randy and many others do not need to make money from selling books, yet courageously write about their experiences despite how it could hurt their professional credibility, is powerful evidence.

It is fascinating that they all insist when they passed from this life, they came fully alive—more alive than they had ever felt before—not just with five senses, but alive with fifty senses, as many describe it. Like Randy, many traveled to a heavenly realm of beauty—not unlike earth, but earthlike beauty experienced in new dimensions of time and space. The mountains are more majestic, the flowers and trees and grass are more alive and vivid, the colors far surpass our color spectrum, and all are infused with the very glory and light of God—a light that is palpable love and life radiating out of everything. Many of these people met God on the other side, and in His presence, they experienced a love transcending all the individual experiences of love they had ever experienced on earth. Imagine feeling all those loves, at once, times one thousand!

At lunch, every time I asked Randy to describe what it felt like to be with Jesus, he struggled to find the words as he fought back overwhelming emotion. It was evident the love and joy he experienced is just as real to him today as it was then, and trying to describe the feeling left him speechless. Shifting subjects to gain composure, Randy described the immense beauty of this paradise surrounding him, which he details later in this book, but he kept saying, "Yet as spectacularly beautiful as paradise was, nothing compared to Him. He was all that mattered and all I wanted, and the intimacy and love I experienced made all other beauty and splendor pale in comparison."

My son and I left our lunch feeling as if we had gotten a sacred peek into the immense love that God has for each one of us, and we could not stop talking about it. I think you will get the same glimpse as you read Randy's story and spiritual insights.

Many of the people I studied indicated that before God sent them back, He would say something to the effect of, You must go back. Your purpose is not yet completed. What Randy shares surrounding this experience, especially regarding purpose in life, is profoundly important for our spiritual growth. I was so grateful I took my son along to join us at lunch that day. I knew that my son, a 22-year-old seeking to find and live out his purpose (as we all do), would be excited to hear what Jesus told Randy about discovering purpose in life. Randy's insight impacted my son greatly, as it did me, and will you, too, as you read his story.

The wisdom Randy received from Jesus does not add to the Bible, but it is unique in that it clarifies what the Bible teaches about how each one of us can follow the purpose God created us to live. That insight alone is worth the price of the book, and I hope you ponder deeply the wisdom Randy conveys about the purpose God put you here to accomplish. No matter where you have been, what you have done or what difficulties you may encounter in the future, God loves you more than you can imagine! He has a plan for your life, and you *can* succeed in finding and fulfilling His plan.

I also appreciate that Randy is a devoted follower of Jesus. Randy has been tested in every way, yet his faith has remained and grown stronger through it all. Not only will you be

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captivated by Randy's experience in the presence of Jesus, but you will be inspired and blessed by the scriptural wisdom and insight God has given him through the pain and suffering he has endured. I truly believe Randy's story will help you learn to navigate life's difficulties with a faith and a love that grow stronger through them all.

John Burke, *New York Times* bestselling author, *Imagine Heaven*; founding pastor, Gateway Church, Austin

# Acknowledgments

Renee, who held my hand in prayer the day we married, the day I nearly died, and all those days that included our trials for as long as it took to experience the joys through them.

My children, who have taught me about God's love and about His grace. You persevered through many challenges, and I am so very proud of you.

Rich Marshall, who unleashed my destiny in prayer and support as I started my human development firm, and encouraged me to share my story.

Bruce Barbour, my literary agent and friend, who saw in *Dying to Meet Jesus* the potential to portray God's love to others.

My friends at Chosen, who have invested their faith and efforts in bringing this book to those who need it.

Northwestern University for being my academic home as a student of writing and science while allowing me to research the world's religions as an agnostic, which served to validate my current faith in Christ.

# Introduction

octors told me I am "lucky to be alive." I had been victimized by my greatest fear. My fear? Yes, I had been overcome with the fear that I would slowly suffocate to death, first as if I was sipping air through a cocktail straw for days until at last it felt as if duct tape had been strapped across my mouth. Beginning in childhood, I had suffered from asthma and as an adult from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), so I knew firsthand the panic that usually sets in from not being able to breathe. At the point of desperation, you want to pass out but cannot. In that moment, with blood clots clogging my main airway, I gasped for breath, as if someone were pressing a pillow over my face relentlessly as I lay there waiting for death.

But the sad irony of my fight to live is that my fight with death was not my greatest struggle—not even close. Facing mental illness, the effects of drug abuse, personal losses and confusion as to why God seemed to turn a deaf ear to all of my trials caused me to feel alone, abandoned. My daughter suffered strokes, fell victim to drugs and tried to kill herself. My son inherited my depression. Troubles with our marriage and our finances led my wife and me to a point of looking at

websites detailing how to commit suicide. But a crisis of faith caused me to challenge God to show up.

And wow, did He ever show up!

Nevertheless, it took brokenness to see God and to live out my purpose. That is what this book is about—finding purpose and intimacy with God through pain. Although readers may be fascinated by my encounter with Jesus during a near-death experience, the story did not end there. A trail of trials and miracles took me on a spiritual journey that I liken to hiking the "Death Trail" of Mount Huashan in China, which, for those of you who do not know about it, has been rated as one of the toughest treks in the world. Trust me when I tell you that the stories of my expedition that I share on these pages are stained with tears.

The journey to closeness with God is cluttered with broken shards that can pierce you to the point of almost giving up. Looking back, I would have preferred to walk a mile over broken glass than to have gone through the suffering of those I dearly love.

Maybe you have felt the same. Trials are the inevitable consequences of living in this world. But the reasons God permits us to go through them are more elusive. For now, I will just say there is a purpose through our pain, and as we journey through the pages of this book, we will look at why God not only allows brokenness but also requires it for a higher purpose than we could possibly understand while caught in the midst of adversity.

Helping people fulfill their purpose has consumed much of my life. After a thirty-year career in business, I founded a human development firm called PACEsetters (www.pacesetters .training) and have trained lots of people—almost one million, in fact, according to my team's most recent count. And as an ordained minister, I have taught numerous church classes across a broad range of biblical topics.

But now my most important purpose is focused on *you*, because you have honored me by reading the content of my

heart within these pages. And I will share with you my humbling secret: My failings and my sufferings have allowed me to know God as my Friend and Counselor and to attain a level of success I could not possibly have achieved by anything this world offers. Before I got real with God, I was often faking it.

When the tough times happened, all too often I doubted the Lord. Only during the good times did my faith seem justified. In the back of my mind, I wondered, *Am I just imagining God's presence in my life?* Not now. I do not just hope that Jesus Christ is real; I have met Him face-to-face. And the steadfastness of my relationship with Him was inextricably strengthened not only in meeting him at the point of death but, to my surprise, through the hard times that followed. Jesus is more real to me today than most of the people I meet in this world. He is also greater than anyone can possibly imagine.

For a long time, I did not want to write this book for fear of the skepticism I myself used to feel after hearing others share similar accounts. I used to mock those claiming to have met God in near-death experiences. Besides, my journey of finding joy through suffering was just too personal, and I did not want to embarrass anyone whose story in this book reveals the rawness of the human condition.

Then came the interview on GodTV.

The host, my former pastor, asked me about my near-death experience on air. Previously, I had only shared my experience with close family and friends. Before the camera, not a hair was out of place, my shoes were shined, my T-shirt was even ironed, and the makeup lady had powdered my face three times. I was prepared with rehearsed answers to anticipated questions. But when I began to share my intimacy with Jesus in heaven, the mere memory caused me to cry like a two-year-old.

On the return flight from the interview, I stared at the peanut bag on my tray for about thirty minutes. My treasure was no longer just mine. People would think of me as a quack, or so I thought. That is when Jesus told me to write a book.

So I began writing, boasting of my accomplishments—you know, those achievements I felt were needed to establish my credentials that most of my training clients required in order to validate my writings and to qualify my coaching services.

No, God's Spirit told me, I want you to write about your failures and your sufferings. After several rewrites, He added, And I want you to share our special time together.

I teared up again. Really? Again? Never in my life had I written about my sufferings and losses. Never. And I wanted to tuck my heavenly meeting with Jesus back into its treasure chest.

God was pushing a story and a message out of me with the force of an oil gusher, and I feared the muck that might pour out. He reminded me of some of my most painful memories as a testimony that we can all survive, and even thrive, through life's trials.

That is how God inspired me to write *Dying to Meet Jesus*.

As I look back, these memories have framed my mission to help give hope to the hopeless. Indeed, the key to joy through sadness happens when we learn to unpack our hearts with memories so we can unleash our destiny.

I am writing from the perspective of someone in love with Jesus Christ, but I was not always a Christian. I have studied all the major religions and was a devoted agnostic in my youth. My passion now is to free people from the limited thinking that prevents them from realizing the fullness of their relationship in Christ. Part of that includes breaking the barriers that place religion over relationship.

Yes, heaven is for real—I have seen it. Yes, God is for real—I have seen Him, too. I became comatose and nearly died as my blood flow stopped, and I temporarily left this world. But it was not heaven that impressed me so much as it was being in the comforting embrace of Jesus. Someone could have thrown

me in a dumpster, and I would have rejoiced if it meant being in there with Jesus. Come to think of it, one could say that this world is like living in a dumpster compared to the wonders of heaven, especially if you have lost someone, been disabled or rejected, or experienced a host of other terrible things that circle in this world like a vulture ready to pounce on someone's dying soul.

Most of my encounters with God are in pleasant heart-to-hearts (perhaps you can relate). But three times I have encountered the God of Love in a miraculous way. Each happened differently—one through searching for the truth, one through dying and one through intense worship. But I have always been with God, even when I did not know it. The same applies to you. God is with you even if you are not with Him. That is the conundrum of walking with Christ.

Know this: You are chosen. Your Father wants to keep you in His loving protection. Jesus desires a deeper place in your heart. The Holy Spirit wants to comfort you beyond the cares of this world. God will find you in your deepest sorrow, but He will never leave you there. Your destiny is the mountaintop over which you will see God's glory that cannot be described by any words in all the dialects of this world. And, believe me, you will be absolutely overwhelmed with God's goodness when you get there.

Three times in my life I have encountered a heavenly visitation with my Lord, the first being what Jesus explained in John 3:3 as being born again, meaning a conversion to a personal faith in Christ. Later, I will explain how I crossed the divide of my agnosticism in becoming a believer. My second transcendence followed my near-death experience (NDE) in heaven. That one was ineffable, but I will try to explain it for you. As He does with most believers, God almost always speaks to me in my conscience with a "gentle whisper" as explained in 1 Kings 19:12. Sometimes He opts to speak through others or directly

through a sense of peace or even through a profound revelation. My third encounter happened during a Christian men's retreat in Tahoe, which revealed to me the difference between God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. My NDE created a familiarity with Jesus that opened a window to experiencing God more deeply during that precious time. But more about that later in the book.

I wrote a novel as a cathartic way to express my time with Jesus. While writing this book, I would be awoken in the middle of the night to jot down insights from heaven—events in conversation with Christ. I now understand that my intimacy with Jesus stayed with me long after meeting Him, resulting in a spiritual awakening entirely new to me. The Holy Spirit would reveal conversations with Jesus I had experienced in heaven that lay dormant until God's Spirit refreshed my recollection. Our together times since the hospital encounter with my Savior have become as conversational as two intimate friends communing with each other. We now talk continuously with most of the language being in the form of peace and assurances. He always tells me this: *Trust me*. That does not come naturally for a "prove it" kind of guy like me.

This book begins with dying and ends with a celebration in heaven. You can decide whether to believe these stories or not. I simply want you to know that they have been verified clinically and through witnesses. As a trained professional in the healthcare industry, I have participated in surgeries, educated physicians on drug therapies and led clinical teams in cardiology and neurology. So I am writing to you from both a clinical perspective of what it means to heal and to die, as well as from a faith perspective. On numerous occasions, I have witnessed God healing people supernaturally. I will share some of these miracles with you, including several that defy human understanding.

In chapter 1, you will learn about my time with Jesus. The Holy Spirit released many of the details from my memory

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vault after I recovered enough to recollect the fullness of my experience. These include my conversations with Jesus about purpose and about life in general, including my observation about being in paradise with Jesus. I am not saving this part until the end as a teaser to get you to read this book. Rather, before you can realize the full measure of God's love, there is a journey we must take together. Please join me as we explore the unfathomable depth of Christ's love and God's destiny for each of us through life's inevitable peaks and valleys, before reaching our final destination in heaven.



# Face-to-Face

About two years prior to my near-death experience (NDE), my employer, once the fastest-growing pharmaceutical company in the world, laid off almost all of its sales and marketing employees after a recall of a drug that was hailed as a probable "cure" for Alzheimer's. Only a few months before, I attended a meeting in Washington, D.C., to announce a new vaccine against Alzheimer's. We were on all the major networks—CNN, Fox News, NBC, CBS, ABC—and the front cover of *Time* magazine. I created a tagline for the introduction of our drug: Making Alzheimer's History. Finally, there was a cure for one of the most devastating diseases of all time.

With the final stage of clinical trials nearly complete, our company stock rose to record highs. Cashing in on my soon-to-vest stock would net me millions. I would be able to fulfill my dreams.

Then came the crash. A few patients in the trial suffered from encephalitis, an inflammation of the brain. This potentially fatal side effect led the FDA to force a recall of our drug. Soon

after, a *Wall Street Journal* front-page story broke the news that our chief financial officer had used off-balance accounting to allow our company to acquire several other companies. Though this was legal, it appeared that our pharmaceutical company was "cooking the books."

Our stock price slid down faster than a greased pig on a fun slide. Within weeks, it became a penny stock. I had to lay off my entire department, and then the board laid me off. My job evaporated, and with it all of my pledged stock and the dreams therein. I would realize the ultimate loss only years later, when my mother developed Alzheimer's. I could only imagine how, if our drug had been made available, she might never have fallen into the cruel grip of this horrid disease.

After a brief tenure with another pharmaceutical company, I started a biotech company. But that venture fizzled when it was clear I needed to raise over sixty million dollars to keep the company afloat.

So I decided to acquire a newspaper. It seemed like God's next career move. I love writing, having studied journalism at Northwestern University, and envisioned growing the enterprise into a media conglomerate—maybe the next Viacom or Fox. Soon after spending much of my savings just to buy this company, I learned that the previous owner had overstated the number of committed advertisers. Turned out, many of the current advertisers intended to discontinue their advertising as soon as their contracts expired. Not wishing to invest another fortune to keep funding the newspaper, I closed the publication. It seemed I was on a slippery slope to nowhere with a young family to feed and a large mortgage to pay.

God, I prayed, why did you allow me to go down this path?

Bills continued to stack up. My wife cried at night. And I recall looking at our young children and worrying about their future. Thoughts of cashing in on my life insurance through a veiled suicide crossed my mind. Like George Bailey from that

favorite Christmas movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*, I wondered if perhaps I was "worth more dead than alive."<sup>1</sup>

One night I stared at the ceiling and said, "God, this time You need to show up—I want to see You!"

### My Brush with Death

One desperate evening in the spring of 2004, my wife, Renee, and I sat at a Christian coffee house in Escondido, California, lamenting our situation, drowning our sorrows in lattes. I recall saying, "Well, dear, at least we have our health." To relieve stress and give myself some semblance of success, I would exercise daily—cycling, weightlifting, running. In my forties, I rivaled the height of my youthful sports conditioning. So even if I was a mental wreck, I was still physically fit. Yep, at the very least we had our health.

Two days later, a recruiter called me from a company I had formerly worked for with much success, Johnson & Johnson (J&J), the largest healthcare company in the world. My former positions—sales manager, trainer, and marketing executive—bode well for gaining the open position to lead a clinical and sales team for the West. So the company flew me to New Jersey for a series of interviews.

The next day, after an apparently successful round of interviews, I flew back to San Diego. The next day, my right calf began to swell. I went to the gym, and then cycled up the coast. Later that day, each step shot pain through my leg. The next day, my calf had swelled to almost twice its size, a result of straining my muscle from exercising the day before, or so I reasoned. As the day progressed, I could not move my leg while walking up the stairs without feeling stinging pain up my leg and a dull heaviness in my calf.

Meanwhile, Renee and I continued planning our family trip to Joshua Tree National Park in a rented RV, a much-needed family vacation to decompress after months of stress. Nothing would deter me from granting our children their long-anticipated RV journey to the majestic mountains of California and Colorado. We had been talking about it for months.

That Friday, the hiring vice president at J&J called me. "We'd like to offer you the position," she said, "and we'll bridge your prior service with J&J."

I responded with a resounding yes while proclaiming a silent hallelujah. My drought would finally end. I hobbled down the stairs to share the good news with Renee. Everything seemed to be lining up for good, except for my excruciatingly painful and swollen leg.

Then my breathing worsened. My first thought was that I was experiencing the worst asthma attack of my life. But I did not freak out about it, suspecting that my seasonal asthma, due to pollen in the air and leaf molds, must have worsened because of my recent cycling routine. I pressed on, focused on the brighter future that awaited us.

Meanwhile, my energy level dropped. I would bend over to pick something up and become tired in the process. I struggled to catch my breath, inhaling deeply without any relief. Though this was very puzzling to me, I ignored it.

I reached down to pick up a small bag of kitchen trash that weighed no more than five pounds. I got maybe two or three steps and needed to stop from exhaustion. I waited a few seconds before continuing my twenty-foot journey to the trash area outside. Three, four steps later, same thing—exhaustion. Four puffs of my rescue inhaler did nothing to help.

"God, what's going on?"

Remembering our celebratory vacation, I put off a trip to the doctor just hoping I could endure the suffering. But when the pain forced me almost to a crawl, I decided to visit an orthopedist to get a prescription for a muscle relaxant and perhaps a painkiller. By now, I had lost the ability to bend my leg without

feeling piercing stings up and down and having to take several puffs of my albuterol inhaler to catch my breath. It was double trouble—I could not walk or breathe. So once I got to the orthopedist, instead of giving me painkillers and a muscle relaxant, he rushed me to the nearest hospital emergency room.

They completed an ultrasound on my leg, then carted me back to the ER. The doctor came back with a worried look on his face and said, "You have elevated levels of D-dimer." For those of you who are unfamiliar with this term, D-dimer is a fibrin degradation product (or FDP), a small protein fragment present in the blood after a blood clot is degraded by fibrinolysis. It is so named because it contains two D fragments of the fibrin protein joined by a cross-link. Elevated levels in my blood could have meant several things, none of them good.

I experienced all the symptoms of a pulmonary embolism, such as lack of oxygen that caused my strained breathing. A pulmonary embolism happens when a clot wedges itself in one of the pulmonary arteries or its branches. Pulmonary emboli can block the entire right or left pulmonary artery, stopping the blood flow to the entire lung—and causing death. So the doctors and nurses scurried to get an IV in my arm to start a heparin drip. Heparin is an anticoagulant intended to prevent blood cells from clotting.

A dull pain, like a pulled muscle, settled in my chest and back just under my left breast. But before long, it felt as if a three-hundred-pound man was sitting on my chest, and I labored to breathe as if something had placed a hand over my mouth. Panic surfaced. Staff began rotating in and out of my ER room. By then, my right calf appeared twice as big as the left one. I could not stand and could barely push any air in or out of my lungs.

A team unlocked my bed and ran me to radiology, where they placed me on a slab for a CT (computed tomography) scan. Shortly after, a respiratory therapist wedged a breathing apparatus into my mouth to force as much air as possible through my narrowed windpipe.

My heart began racing.

The nurse who took my vitals said I was a "walking dead man."

Then a physician came in and, with a furrowed eyebrow, informed me that I had six blood clots. "It's very serious," he added, "because the clots have traveled to your lungs and are blocking your pulmonary artery, the only passageway to your lungs." He told me I was one of the "lucky ones," because a lot of people in my condition who come into the hospital vertical leave horizontal, feet first.

Imagine how comforting those words were to me as I lay there in a panic, literally suffocating to death, as though I was being immersed in water and forced to stay there. Later, I would learn that a 27-year-old surfer died that night from the same critical illness I was experiencing, pulmonary embolism, which is the third leading cause of death. A victim can die within seconds.

My condition was in the advanced stage, as five major clots and one growing clot were almost completely occluding my only airway. The only immediate solution requires a specially trained surgeon with experience in performing an embolectomy (surgical removal of a blood clot). The surgeon would need to place me on cardiopulmonary bypass (so a machine could do the work of my heart and lungs), crack open my chest and adroitly reach in with a fine instrument to pierce the pulmonary artery and pull out the clots. None of those specialist surgeons lived within thirty miles of the hospital where I lay in mortal crisis. By the time the surgical team prepped me and the surgeon arrived, I would be dead.

In a crisis, near death, I learned that prayer turns into shouts of desperation. There is no time for casual requests. Screams to God rose silently from within my spirit. I thought of my children, little Ryan, ten, and Annie, eight, and my faithful wife, Renee, who just hours before had found some glimmer of hope because, finally, I would be going back to a well-paying job.

Renee had stopped working outside the home after our children were born. I knew that without me she would not be able to support the family in the lifestyle we were accustomed to. We had gone from living "the dream" in a million-dollar-plus house with an income in the top percentile of wage earners to having no insurance and being in the bottom percentile. And here I was facing death and hospital bills that would bankrupt my family.

God, why now? Why at the cusp of finding hope?

And then I thought back to my conversation with Renee at the coffee house. *At least we have our health*, I had said.

Not now. Even that was gone.

Then came the waiting.

My IV line was my only hope of surviving. Drip, drip, drip

My eyes fixed on the slow flow of clear liquid intended to prevent further clotting. For two days, I labored to breathe with air pouring into my lungs through a ventilator. A second scan revealed that the blockage in my lungs occluded the pulmonary artery. Weakness forced me to sleep until I awoke gasping for air.

A doctor who came into my room to draw blood strained to get a drop of blood. "Strange," he said. "I can't draw any blood from your arm." He looked down and spotted some redness around the site where the IV needle entered my vein, then sent what little blood he could draw to the laboratory for analysis.

The result showed I had an infection caused by staphylococcus bacteria now surging throughout my bloodstream because the infection had passed through the IV line. Further lab results confirmed the infection as methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus (MRSA), which is caused by a type of staph bacteria

that has become resistant to many of the antibiotics used to treat ordinary staph infections. My strain happened to be one of the most resistant strains, and my body was in severe sepsis with the next stage being septic shock. The MRSA, having been carried on the tip of my IV needle into the vein, now surged throughout my body, threatening to shut down one or more of my organs.

Now I had two of the top "killers" attacking my body, along with the threat of pneumonia because of my compromised lungs. The infection continued coursing through my entire body. This final attack created hypercoagulability throughout my bloodstream such that my blood cells formed a series of clumps that blocked the passage of other blood cells. It was like a series of car accidents blocking movement on dozens of roadways, or veins and arteries in this case. One of the physicians explained that if one of the blood clot clumps traveled to my brain, a stroke would almost certainly cause death.

God, I prayed, don't let me be a vegetable, forcing my family to support me as I rot away. Just let me die if that's the case.

Within a short time after the clinical team left my bedside, I felt as though I had been dipped into a cold bath. My teeth clapped against each other. I attempted to suck in one more remnant of air as my chest arched over the bed. That turned out to be my last voluntary movement before I lost all control of my muscles. Convulsions turned my body into something like a flopping fish out of water—my torso and limbs thrashed up and down while my head pounded with pain. The force of my heart pounding against my chest wall made me think it might burst out of my chest at any moment.

### My Encounter with Jesus

Gasping for air, I felt like a floppy fish out of water. My blood cells started clumping together, causing a traffic jam throughout

my veins. My heart could not keep pace with the extreme stress caused by the deadly strain of bacteria coursing through what blood flow remained in me. But then what happened next left me altogether lifeless and yet wonderfully alive.

In a nanosecond, my mind surrendered every thought to futility, and I wished I could just die. Shortly thereafter, I lost consciousness. A black void surrounded me, and I appeared to be in a space of nothingness.

That darkness engulfed my surroundings as my body floated in an airy environment. I was moving as if carried by a balloon through a haze with no awareness of what existed above except that the shades around me lightened as I ascended from pitchblack, to dark gray, to light gray, and eventually into a brilliant hue of colors illuminated by a showering light that exposed everything below and above.

In the far distance, I could see hills and figures battling with each other as I floated above them.

I had a vivid sense I was in a dimension altogether different, beyond any explanation of time or space, with one world being harsh and earthly and another ethereal and peaceful; and yet the different environments interfaced in some odd relationship that blended into an astute awareness of their interdependence. From afar, I witnessed ghastly figures lunging after towering figures bathed in the light. From above, I dared not look because of the blinding brightness.

I lingered in a serene place with a faint view of brown valleys and green rolling hills now surrounding me, and then a beam of brightness exposed everything with its shimmering illumination. My body settled upon cushy ground. Peace replaced the fear I had felt in limbo. A waft of air penetrated my body with warmth. All my fears faded.

At the time I thought, I feel like a child settling into my favorite chair after a hard day at school, knowing that Mom is baking my favorite chocolate chip cookies.

An assuring body leaned into me. He wrapped his arm around my torso, imparting an intensity of love beyond explanation. As I began to turn, he pressed his cheek gently into mine, then wrapped his other arm around me and hugged me tenderly.

Comfort surged through me with an assurance I had never felt before. It reminded me of times when as a child I drank warm cocoa on a cold winter day outside of Philadelphia, where I grew up, only this was a thousand times more pleasant. That first surge of warmth spread and made everything go limp.

So this is love.

I distinctly remember that one overwhelming thought, since I had never experienced love's fullness before that figure touched me.

His bright eyes tunneled into me, exposing everything dark within me. "It will be all right," he said, which confirmed what I had felt—He was Jesus.

I could literally see His figure, smell His fragrance and feel His smooth skin against my face. Everything in me spoke that truth. He was altogether familiar as a Friend and as a loving Father in one. His voice whispered.

For some strange reason, I felt as though I could not yet turn to look directly into His face, but I saw His velvety robe and felt His warmth. For most of my life, I had suffered from nasal congestion that limited my ability to taste or smell, but in that space the freshness of everything around me—flowers, pines, oranges—filled my nostrils with a fragrance more intense than I had ever experienced.

I could not speak a word. Nor did I need to speak a word, because I knew He understood me: my thoughts, my feelings and everything about me.

"Jesus," I said finally.

"Trust me, My beloved," he replied. From the corner of my eye, I could faintly see His sparkling left eye and long nose as He rested His soft face on mine. "It's not your time."

What a shame. I wanted to stay with Him and in those peaceful surroundings. The sweet perfume around me exceeded any scent of flowers I had ever smelled, and the air was fresh like after a thunderstorm. The colors around me were more intense than any I had ever beheld as I took in the green of the hills and the blue streaming waters.

Breathe . . . I could breathe.

So this is what it's like to really breathe.

For the first time in my life, I could actually breathe deeply and fill my lungs to capacity. All my life I had suffered from severe asthma and pulmonary disease and had no idea what it was like to breathe freely. Yet now each breath flowed easily and smoothly. No pain, no discomfort, no struggle remained.

Jesus and I began to walk together, and He continued holding me tightly against Him as though sensing my fear of returning. He read my thoughts, or so I understood. "Do not fear," He said. "I am with you always."

I did not feel the need to ask questions or say anything because I simply wanted to stay in this place of absolute comfort. I wanted to cry out in joy but had no tears, only a deep sense of belonging as if I was returning home after a long absence. Jesus being with me erased all concerns. I knew beyond any shadow of doubt that He would take care of everything. He was in control.

He did not need to say I love you because His very presence exuded a love I had only known faintly before this. He was pure love, indescribable by any word because His very presence embodied love. There is nothing—nothing—that even remotely describes the depth and breadth of Jesus' love, although I could see for the first time that the vastness of the universe appeared to echo the greatness of what I felt in His presence.

After some time, Jesus breathed into my face. His refreshing breath warmed me again. "You're going back," He said, "and I'm going to restore you."

I grabbed His garment like a child not wanting Him to leave home. I did not care about any surroundings; I only wanted to be with Him. I knew there was beauty around me in every sense of the word—gentle rolling hills and valleys and every part of my surroundings like some extraordinary landscape painting come to life—but all I desired was to remain close to Jesus.

And then I heard angels singing a beautiful, glorious choral song that resonated through the airwaves in perfect harmony. There must have been at least a hundred voices singing in perfect unison, and I imagined scores of angels singing the worship song. Never in all my experience had I heard such rhythmic beauty echoing within every sphere of my awareness. It soothed my soul and caused me to rejoice at the same time.

Next, Jesus hugged me and kissed me as I remembered my mother doing before I left for grade school but longed to stay home.

Then, at once, all that vanished.

I awoke on my hospital bed, my body perfectly still, and I felt the ache of someone pressing hard against my chest. Clinicians stood at my bedside, along with two visitors who were singing the very worship song I had heard with Jesus. The acrid smell of the hospital room spoiled my peace as I struggled to listen to the couple's soothing melody, because it contrasted so sharply with the pleasant fragrance I smelled with Jesus.

I was once again struggling to breathe and loathed the room's starkness. It was gray and cold, and the pungent smell of hospital disinfectants assaulted my nostrils.

To avoid my oppressive surroundings, I focused solely on the couple singing at my bedside. Was it them I was hearing? The song was the same. No, there were more than two people singing that same song. Before I heard a chorus—many voices, not just these two people.

It took some time before I understood. Angels must have joined the couple at my bedside, singing that prayerful hymn.

The prayers of those saints did indeed resonate unto the hall-ways of heaven. I now believe that the music was breathed from God to create some lyrical connection between heaven and earth to make my harsh transition more tolerable.

Thanks to my brush with death, I now understand 1 Corinthians 15:55 quite personally: "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" (NLT). Transitioning from a hospital bed to the presence of the very embodiment of love tells you death has neither victory nor sting.

### The Road to Recovery

After a few days, the clots in my lungs began to shrink. But even before they did, upon returning I could breathe despite the clots, as if God had opened my airways. Heavy doses of antibiotics began breaking down my systemic infection, so the chills and night sweats subsided.

Within ten days, I was able to walk the hospital floor, albeit slowly and painfully, as though dragging a wooden leg. The first time I looked outside, I looked up to the sky in hopes of seeing Jesus, feeling His embrace. I longed for it.

For several weeks after being discharged from the hospital after my NDE, I was mostly bedridden, and my recovery took months, as the valves that control blood flow in my leg had been damaged. Some valves within my vascular system had permanently collapsed, causing my blood at certain points to flow backward. My lungs were damaged, as well as other organs. I required constant anticoagulation (blood-thinning) medication, causing me to bleed and bruise.

On top of that, I experienced consistent headaches and muscle spasms that kept me up at night, as well as unexplained dizziness. I had lost about thirty pounds, so most of my clothes no longer fit. Since we did not have insurance at the time of my medical crisis, I owed over one hundred thousand dollars

in medical bills. Even to this day I require routine medical attention and occasional hospital stays because of my brush with death.

I walked with a limp, wondering if I would be able to meet the demands of a job requiring constant travel. Despite it all, I began my new job. Renee traveled with me to New Jersey from our home in San Diego to help with my recovery and weekly injections of anticoagulants. Long-distance air travel frightened me since, to the best of everyone's assessments, being immobilized with no fluid intake during the flight back from my interview is what caused the deep vein thrombosis (blood clots in the calf or lower leg) that grew as time passed. Apparently, exercise may have caused some blood clots to break off and travel to my lungs. Five major clots were obstructing my airways.

That brief time I spent with Jesus represents the highlight of my life in contrast to my lowest point just before I was with Him. In a fairy tale, they could say I lived happily ever after. Of course, this life on earth is more like a roller-coaster ride. But I will never again doubt that Jesus is by my side. I know it. I can testify to you that He is real. He was not some imagined figure. He was as real as any person I have met on earth and vastly more loving.

I remained curious as to why God allowed me to suffer with a near-death experience. I asked Him to tell me why. Weeks later, He spoke in the stillness of my spirit, unlike the audible voice I heard while lying in the hospital.

This time He said, You asked that I show Myself to you, and so I did.

Indeed, I did want Him to "show up." Remember my desperate cry out to God when all seemed lost? I had said to Him, *This time You need to show up*, *God*. Indeed, I got the response for which I vehemently prayed.

And you know what? I wouldn't trade that experience for anything in the world, as strange as that may seem; because I

will never question God again as to whether or not He is absolutely real and wonderfully loving. I know the answer beyond any doubt, and my hope in this book is to save you the misery of dying to meet Jesus in order to live out that reality in your own life here on earth.

Friends, be careful what you pray for. God reveals Himself in the conscience of our mind, or within our spirit, and only face-to-face in heaven. Only a departure from this life (e.g., by death or near death) ushers us to heaven. As believers, we are foreigners in this world with a purpose to accomplish in service to the King of kings. Get too comfortable in this world, and be prepared for someone or something to turn it upside down. Soon, we will return home. For now, there is work to be done in this broken world.

Now my prayers come from knowing and not from questioning. Instead of seeking answers, I seek His presence. For years after, I could not share my near-death experience with anyone except with my wife, Renee, and only a handful of friends, perhaps out of fear of being called delusional, or because it felt too personal, or maybe because Jesus wanted to keep it between just the two of us. Only recently did I feel led to share it with the world. I am by nature skeptical and formerly believed near-death experiences (NDEs) to be chemically induced, imagined, or faked. I was skeptical, that is, until I experienced my own.

Meeting Jesus face-to-face freed me to understand pain and suffering beyond my limited ability to rationalize the apparent contradiction between God's love and our struggles. After my brush with death in meeting Jesus, I understood God's love from a much different mindset. I would like to think of my transformation as me having adopted the mind of Christ more fully (see Isaiah 40:13, Romans 11:34; 1 Corinthians 2:16).

Perhaps that was my gift from heaven: the removal of all doubt that God is real, since meeting Jesus in heaven does that. Maybe sharing that revelation with you is one of the reasons

He spared my life, and because of that I now hope to impart to you the realness of God. I also hope to convey the Person of Love in a way that transcends our trivialized concept of love. That is my purpose—to reveal the reason for our faith.

### Finding Joy through Sadness

Statistics tell us that your chance of having an NDE is miniscule, but the good news is that you do not need to die to know intimacy with Jesus. You do, however, need to experience the pains inflicted similarly upon each of us in this terribly fallen world. The road we will take to true joy leads through loss, sadness and pain toward a state of brokenness, purpose and empowerment, and finally an awareness of how great God's love is for you. Please do not despair that you must wait for the best to come. The journey will be well worth it. The truth is, we cannot taste of heaven's bounty without first tasting the bitterness in this world. Moreover, we cannot fully relate to God without brokenness.

One stop in your journey will be a challenge to evaluate your purpose in this life. We are "God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2:10). God has a plan for you. Each of us needs to know our purpose on this earth with crystal clarity because that is the reason we were placed on this earth. Then we need to understand and practice the power of God's Holy Spirit that equips us to "fight the good fight," as the apostle Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 6:12: "Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses." This requires power to push through the trials in life not only for ourselves but for others as well.

Toward that end, I would like to say that life proceeded smoothly after my time with Jesus in heaven. Little did I know that my greatest trials lay ahead of me. This book is about finding joy through sadness by grasping trials instead of avoiding them. Until we understand how interwoven joy and sadness are, we cannot confidently walk in faith over the long term. Eventually, the harshness of this world will wear away our belief in God's providence, and we will become hopers instead of believers—only hoping that our faith is merited.

That is not what God wants. He wants us to know Him, not to just hope for Him or imagine Him. He wants to be real to us by compelling us to get real with Him. In the process, we will discover that brokenness is truly the gateway to joy and to intimacy with God—and ultimately to paradise.

In 2 Corinthians 12:2, Paul mentioned a man who claimed to be "caught up to the third heaven." Many scholars believe Paul was talking about himself in the third person, perhaps to avoid any appearance of boastfulness as he explained in the passage. Some surmise that Paul kept quiet about this for several years and only reluctantly shared his vision after that. If so, I can empathize with Paul. It took me about the same number of years to share my vision. I never wanted something so private to become so public.

I never wanted the attention to be on me. I never wanted the experience to distract from the message—that drawing near to God is paramount to a life well lived. But then my former pastor, Rich Marshall, asked me to share my NDE during a television broadcast to as many as three hundred million people, and so I did. What is more, I cried while sharing this most intimate encounter. And then Rich asked me to share about my failures with the masses.

God, I thought, You really do work through my weaknesses, don't You?

My vision of Jesus, which I shared with that audience and with you now, is probably similar to those visions encountered by many other followers of Christ. I am not special. Visions are

common within the New Testament. Jesus' Transfiguration is described as a vision to the disciples (see Matthew 17:1–9). In Acts, Paul had a revelation of Jesus on the road to Damascus (see 22:6–11; 26:12–20), and Stephen saw a vision of Jesus at his death (see 7:55–56). John had many visions on Patmos, as recorded in the book of Revelation. The list goes on even today. I am just one of many on that list.

What matters is not whether you are on that list or not; what matters is that each one who believes in Jesus Christ as his or her Savior is written in God's "Book of Life" (Philippians 4:3; Revelation 3:5; 20:12, 15). If your name is on this list, then rest assured that you will someday meet Jesus face-to-face (see 1 Corinthians 13:12). I have only one thing to say about that encounter: Wowza!