



My Journey *to* Heaven

What I Saw and How It
Changed My Life

MARVIN J. BESTEMAN

with LORILEE CRAKER



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Dedicated to

Ruth,
my wife of fifty-four adventurous years

Steve Yasick,
my dear son-in-law,
who went to be with his Lord in 2006

Irvin Zylstra,
my friend since childhood,
who went to be with his Lord in July 2011



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Introduction

It's been six years since I had a life-changing preview of eternity, visiting heaven's gate for about half an hour, give or take.

In that short round-trip, I was reunited with loved ones; saw babies, children, and angels; peeked at the throne of God and Book of Life; and had a conversation with the apostle Peter, who I must say was a little bit shaggy looking. He always has been my favorite character in the Bible.

At first, I promised myself that no one would ever know what had happened to me. *I* knew that it was true, and that it hadn't been a dream or a hallucination. But I felt others would question my sanity if I told them what I saw and experienced on the other side. And when you get to be my age, you don't need any more excuses for people to question your sanity.

Why would anyone believe me? I asked myself. So by and large, I kept quiet, stewing like a stubborn old goat about why I had to be sent back.

Then one day God gave me a good shove in the pants, basically telling me to open my mouth and start talking. Yes, he spoke to me out loud, and though he didn't add "or else," I didn't want to push my luck. Obviously, God wanted me to tell others about his heaven.

Soon after, I began sharing my story with grief groups, church groups, and individuals young and old.

My spiritual mentors, including my pastor, felt that about 20 percent of the people who heard my story wouldn't believe it—such is human nature and people's tendency to be cynical in the face of anything unverifiable. But in reality, it's been more like 2 percent.

Maybe that's because people can tell I'm not the kind of man to put up with a lot of malarkey. I'm a Dutchman, which means I put up with even less bunk than most. I'm a veteran of the United States Army, having served for four years in the late fifties and early sixties. I was in active duty from 1956 until 1958, and then reserve duty until 1962.

Plus, I'm a banker by trade, someone who likes to deal in concrete numbers and percentages.

So, yes, most folks have believed my story, for which I am most grateful. Oh, a few here and there chalk it up to my being at a ripe old age—"Old Marv slipped a gear or two when he dreamed this one up"—but the truth is, I'm old, but I still have all my marbles (although, don't ask my wife Ruth about that; she might change that to "most of his marbles"!).

I hope you believe me, but even if you don't, I am under orders to tell you what happened to me on the night of April 28, 2006, when God gave this grandpa a bonus, a preview of heaven beyond anything I could have dreamed up in my banker's head.

And he who commanded me to tell my story—well, I believe he thought of you personally reading this book, and how my story would fill you with wonder and give you the comfort and assurance you've been wanting all along.

At Heaven's Gate

In the middle of the night, as I lay in my hospital bed in Ann Arbor, Michigan, visions of celestial beauty were the last thing on my mind. At seventy-one, I had just had surgery at the University of Michigan Medical Center to remove a rare pancreatic tumor called *insulinoma*. It was after visiting hours, and Ruth and my family had left for the day. I was alone and racked with pain and more than a little bit grumpy as I tossed and turned; more than anything, I just wanted to sleep and escape the misery and discomfort for just a little while. I had no idea I was about to get an escape beyond my wildest dreams.

Suddenly, two men I had never seen before in my life walked into my hospital room. Don't ask me how I knew, but immediately I had a sense that these men were angels. I wasn't the least bit anxious, either.

Once they had detached me from my tangle of tubes, the angels gathered me in their arms and we began to ascend, on a quick journey that felt light and smooth through the bluest of blue skies.

I was deposited on solid ground, in front of a monumental gate. And no, I don't remember it as being "pearly."

Standing in a short line of people, I observed the other thirty-five or so heavenly travelers, people of all nationalities. Some were dressed in what I thought were probably the native costumes of their lands. One man carried a baby in his arms.

I saw color-bursts that lit up the sky, way beyond the northern lights I had seen once on a trip to Alaska. Simply glorious.

My geezer body felt young and strong and fantastic. The aches and pains and limitations of age were just gone. I felt like a teenager again, only better.

The music I heard was incomparable to anything I had ever heard before. There was a choir of a million people, thousands of organs, thousands of pianos. It was the most lush and beautiful music I had ever heard. And do you know that every single day since my experience I have heard a few snatches of that music? I am so blessed to remember that heavenly sound.

And then, a greeting: "Hello, Marv. Welcome to heaven. My name is Peter."

Standing before me was one of my best-loved scriptural figures, the hotheaded apostle Peter, the "rock" upon which Christ built his church and alleged gatekeeper of Glory. I think the reason why I've always felt close to Peter is because I find him so relatable. He's hotheaded and I'm hardheaded, just for starters.

We talked a bit, and even argued (guess who won?), and when I play that conversation over and over in my head, I

am thrilled to have had such an encounter with one of the bravest and best men who ever walked this earth.

I'll tell you more about that incredible meeting later on, but for now, you should know that Peter leafed through the Book of Life, which was actually multiple books, looking for my name. But of course he couldn't find it; otherwise I would be in heaven now, possibly having another lively debate with Peter. He left his post at heaven's gate briefly to consult with God about what to do with me—keep me or send me home. My vote was definitely to keep me there. Surely it was on purpose, but Peter left the door to heaven open, revealing a translucent gate through which I could see inside.

What I saw beyond the gate is a kind of revelation. I believe God wants me to share it with you, so that you know some of what to expect when this life is over. I can't wait to tell you about how people were dressed in heaven, how magnificently healthy and happy they all looked, and how the countless babies and children I saw were laughing and playing. One of the biggest reasons I decided to share my story was to offer comfort to those who had lost a baby or a child. So many of you have lost a precious son or daughter, and I know exactly how deeply painful that loss is. Fifty-some years later, we still miss our baby boy, William John, who lived for just ten hours before he was taken from our arms.

I didn't get to see my son in heaven, but I know he's there and I will be with him next time I go. Because next time, I'm not coming back!

Wonderfully, I did see six loved ones beyond the gate, and I'll tell you all about how they looked and what they meant to me in chapters 9 and 10.

Several minutes passed before Peter returned with a divine dispatch: “Marv, I talked to God, and God told me to tell you that you have to go back, that he still has work for you to do on earth. He still has things for you to finish there.”

But, but, but . . . ! Peter and I tussled a bit over that matter, you can be sure. Trust me when I say that once you visit heaven, you never, *ever* want to come back to earth. It’s truly a place that is everything good and beautiful you can imagine, where you will feel more free and loved than you ever dreamed possible. It’s really a future to eagerly await, that “home in Glory Land that outshines the sun,” as the song goes.

In the end, I really didn’t have much to say about whether I was staying or going. Before I could mount a rebuttal to Peter, I was sent back in the blink of an eye. Next thing I knew, I was back in my hospital bed at U of M (the University of Michigan).

Once again, I was lying flat on my back, riddled with pain and attached to a mess of tubes plugged in all over the place. I made a snap decision then and there never to reveal what I had seen and heard that stunning night.

Why would anyone believe one word? That good old salt-of-the-earth Marv Besteman was chosen, out of millions of people, to take a sneak peek at eternal paradise? I could just imagine what they’d be thinking:

“Sure, Marv hitched a ride with a couple of angels to the clouds above—cloud nine is more like it!”

“Isn’t it sad? That nice Mr. Besteman was hallucinating that he argued with St. Peter—he even thinks he told Peter he was a ‘hardheaded Hollander’! Well, he is hardheaded . . .”

I felt it in my bones—no one would buy it. I especially knew I could never tell anyone about seeing Steve, the son-in-law who had asked me years ago to be his dad, the bonus son I loved like he was my own boy. Steve had died just two months before I went to heaven, of Ehlers-Danlos syndrome, a cruel and despicable illness I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy. How I wanted to tell my daughter how wonderful her husband looked, how vibrant and content! But I felt at the time it would only confuse and hurt her. Her grief was still so raw.

The only problem was my trip to heaven *had* happened—and just the way I remembered it.

I couldn't stop thinking about my angels, and the radiant and peaceful place called heaven I flew to with them.

Images from that journey bombarded me: the colorbursts that lit up the sky, the hundreds and thousands of babies and children I saw, and for one twinkle in time, the glimpse I had of God's throne with two indescribable images upon it.

In my mind's eye, I could picture Peter perfectly, his bushy hair, his ancient robes, and the look in his eyes when he told me that he couldn't find my name in the Book of Life—"for today."

Would I buy a story like that myself if someone else was telling it? No, probably not, although I'll never know for sure.

"You Have Been Truly Blessed"

For a long time, I was angry at God for taking me to that perfect, joyful place and then bringing me back to life on

earth, to an old man's aches and pains, in a place full of dirt and crime, disease and tears. I've since done some reading about people who have visited heaven, and by and large they almost all come back feeling depressed and angry. According to some scholars, even Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the grave, the brother over whom Mary and Martha wept, struggled in his life after resurrection.

It's hard for people to understand, I know. Wouldn't a heavenly traveler be filled to the brim with marvelous news of things to come for all God's children? Yet, I know how much I wrestled with negative emotions when I came back. In the end, everyone who sees heaven even for one second wants to stay forever, no matter how nice their life might be here on earth.

God had plans for me, a mission for this retiree that went way beyond golfing and having coffee at Arnie's Bakery with my buddies. He had begun a work in me that night, and slowly but surely he showed me his purpose and mission in sending me on a round-trip to heaven and back.

Five months after my return, I broke down and told my sweetheart of fifty years everything. As tears poured down my face, the whole account came tumbling out, even the part about seeing our Amy's Steve.

Ruth's response changed everything.

"Marv, you have been truly blessed," she said, shaking her head, her bright blue eyes wide with wonder.

After I broke the ice with Ruth, my resolve to keep all the hard-to-believe details to myself began to melt. We shared the story with our three children, Julie, Amy, and Mark.

That Christmas, Amy gave me a copy of a book I had never heard of—*90 Minutes in Heaven* by Don Piper.

Somehow, this bestseller had completely escaped my attention until that Christmas morning after the heaven trip. It occurred to me that God might want me to write a book too. But I'm a banker, not a writer, and writing a book seemed to me then about as likely as traveling to heaven.

Then, nine months after my surgery, I was experiencing some issues with my stomach, which was swollen and distended. My visit to a doctor, the conversation we had that day in his office, and the crystal clear voice of direction I heard in my spirit sent me deeper down the path of sharing my story. Withholding what I had experienced was no longer an option.

God had made it perfectly plain: if I would faithfully tell his story, he would use it to bring comfort to the grieving, to encourage those who were dying and their loved ones, and to plant a seed of hope in those who had not yet chosen Christ.

That's why you hold my story today. I invite you to be my companion and I yours on a journey to heaven and back. Together, we'll pull back the curtain separating us from the other side, and we'll learn many intriguing and fantastic things about angels, the Book of Life, the apostle Peter, and heaven itself, where God prepares a place for you and me. At last, we will be with the Person we were made for, in a home we were made to be.

One more thing before we start: I have given many talks over the last few years to people eager for information on what heaven is like. At the end of every talk, I tell folks that next time, I won't be coming back. I'll be staying there forever with my Lord and those I love.

“And I’ll be waiting for each one of you at the gate,” I say as I close my talk. “Will I see you there?”


Will I see *you*? If you don’t already know the answer to this question, will you do an old man a favor and chew on it as we travel through these pages together?

Okay then, let’s get going . . .

1



A One-in-a-Million Case



I had never heard of insulinoma before I was diagnosed with it. As diseases go, this wasn't one of the famous ones that cause people to cluck their tongues, grimace, or shake their heads in sympathy. When I told people I had insulinoma, they looked at me like they didn't know what I was talking about—which they didn't.

But, have it I did, and that's what led me to the University of Michigan Medical Center in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in April of 2006.

It all started in 2003, three years before my diagnosis with this strange illness. Ruth and I were in Florida for a few months, basking in the sun and trying to beat each other at golf (at the time, I could still beat her, but barely). It was there I had my first “episode.”

Apparently (I have no memory of this), one night we were sitting around the condo, and suddenly I just zoned out. According to Ruth, I just stared into space for an hour, not knowing who she was, completely disoriented and confused, and a little bit agitated. One bonus of having a nurse for a wife is that she can often tell what's wrong with me, or at least she knows what to do to help the situation.

She thought it seemed like a case of low blood sugar, and she shoved a bit of chocolate in my mouth to get my blood sugar evened out. Ruth told me I couldn't even shut my own mouth to chew it, that's how out to lunch I was. She shut my mouth for me, something she probably wishes she could have done a long time ago.

Ruth took me to the ER for tests the next day and they couldn't find anything wrong.

For the next three years, I was fine—no more “episodes” to speak of. Since I hadn't even remembered what happened, I didn't think much about it. Ruth, though, being a nurse and my wife both, tucked it away in the back of her mind, wondering if it would ever happen again and why it happened in the first place.

We were vacationing up north in Boyne Mountain, Michigan, with two of our grandchildren, when I had another spell. It was the same kind of thing as in Florida; I woke up sometime in the night, dazed and incoherent, and had no idea who Ruth was or where I was. When Ruth woke up, she saw that I had pulled my legs up in the fetal position, and I was staring at her without really seeing her. I moaned and moaned, but didn't appear to have any pain.

Ruth got me up to go to the bathroom, and she had to hold me up the whole way because I was so shaky.

She made me eat some more chocolate, but somehow kept me quiet. Our granddaughter was sleeping in the same hotel room, and she didn't want to scare her.

The next morning, I felt perfectly fine, once again, and had no memory of anything happening the night before. We took the kids to the water park, went out for lunch, and drove home to Grand Rapids, where it happened again.

I had fallen asleep on the couch, and when I woke up, once more I didn't know where I was or who Ruth was. According to Ruth, I was acting anxious and a bit crazy, my heart racing and my limbs shaking. I was moaning again, and repeatedly beating the couch cushions.

This time, she was freaking out too, on the inside. I began crawling around on the floor, trying to get out of the condo, trying to get away from poor Ruth. She was grabbing me by the belt, attempting to physically slow me down so I couldn't get out. She finally managed to lock the doors and dial 911. Nurse or no nurse, my wife was definitely alarmed, but her training helped her stay calm and take command of the situation.

“What's he doing?” the 911 dispatcher asked her.

“He's crawling around on the floor, and he has no idea who I am.”

The ambulance got there about five minutes later, loaded me up, and took me to Spectrum Health hospital in downtown Grand Rapids. I was at Spectrum for ten days, where I was poked and prodded within an inch of my life. Finally, they diagnosed me with insulinoma, a rare tumor of the pancreas that shows itself as being the exact opposite of diabetes. My pancreas was generating so much insulin it was eating all the sugar in my body, hence the strange spells. I had a blood sugar level of 31, which is apparently very bad news.

I had the dubious honor of being the first case of insulinoma they had ever diagnosed at this hospital, one of the top hospitals in the United States. Literally, less than one in one million people are diagnosed with it each year. Around 200 cases are confirmed annually in the whole country. I was one of those lucky people.

The doctors at Spectrum recommended that I see a very specialized surgeon, either at the University of Michigan Medical Center in Ann Arbor or at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. I had attended U of M for a short time in my college days; I even laced up skates and played hockey for them back in the day. I figured they already had some of my money, so I might as well give them more of it.

I had to lie around and wait for a couple of days for a bed to be free in Ann Arbor. Ruth had left the hospital for the night and returned to our home, just twenty minutes away, so I was alone when abruptly I was told they had a bed ready at U of M. They packed me in an ambulance and off we sped to Ann Arbor, two and a half hours away. Ruth decided to come the next day, in the daylight, so she could find the place more easily.

Once at U of M, I found out just how special I was. There at the hospital, doctors wouldn't come in my room one at a time; it always was three to five at a time. I guess my condition was so rare the doctors were swarming me so they could inspect this extraordinary guy and his exceptional ailment.

They had diagnosed me with insulinoma in Grand Rapids, but those doctors and the new ones in Ann Arbor still didn't know exactly where the tumor was located on my pancreas.

This was crucial, because apparently a surgeon can't just go in and poke around someone's pancreas. Evidently, you can bleed terribly if they go in without knowing the exact spot they are trying to reach. But finding the right spot was turning out to be easier said than done.

A young doctor at the U of M hospital had a brilliant idea: she would pass a pediatric scope through me to find

the exact location of my tumor. It worked, thanks be to God. Ruth and I were so relieved that she had found the tumor. We didn't want to face the possibility of excessive bleeding in surgery.

My surgery lasted for five hours. Dear Ruth had already been through such a roller coaster, wondering what was wrong with me, and knowing there was something way off, but not knowing what it could be. My "episodes" were stressful too, and then the drama of my being diagnosed with this extremely rare illness and the worry over whether or not the doctors would find the site of the tumor.

She says God gave her deep comfort throughout those five hours as she waited to find out how things had gone on the operating table. As it turned out, things had gone well, in terms of the doctor's goals for the surgery. They had found the site of the tumor no problem, and my blood glucose went from a low 80 to 180 and quickly to a normal 115 once the tumor was out. The only problem was that I awakened in more pain than I thought was humanly possible.

According to Ruth and our family and friends, plenty of loved ones stopped by to visit me after my surgery. But I didn't know and didn't care who was in that room. Phil Mickelson could've stopped by to get some golf tips from me, and I wouldn't have cared.

A doctor whose sole job was to control people's pain spent three hours in my hospital room, adjusting my pain medications. From about five p.m. to eight p.m. that evening, she tried to get my pain under control. Whatever she was doing wasn't working one little bit, though it wasn't for lack of her trying.

I'm not being a big baby when I tell you it was horrible. I've been told the reason why I hurt so bad is because the pancreas is behind the stomach, so the surgeon had to move my other organs around to get to it. Plus, with a major surgery like this, the nerve endings are apparently severed, and then later they have to reattach and regenerate. At that point, my nerve endings hadn't regenerated yet, to say the least. Oh, and I almost forgot: the epidural stopped working during the surgery and I had to have a new one midway through the procedure. "Ouch" doesn't begin to cover it.

Nurses like to say, "How's your pain on a scale of one to ten?" This was way beyond a ten.

I was in and out, dozing, coming to and from that fiery pain. I remember just jabbing my pain control button over and over but nothing seemed to work. Ruth says that because it was my first night, post-op, the nurses would have been in about every half an hour to check on me. Ruth wasn't familiar with Ann Arbor, and she wanted to get back to her hotel before it got too dark outside. She kissed me on the cheek, told me she loved me, and walked out of the room. She left at about eight o'clock, just after the pain control doc had given up for the night and left my room.

I lay in my bed, miserable and terribly restless with the pain. There was a clock in my room, but I couldn't see it (and I didn't care what time it was, either). That's why I didn't know exactly what time it was on the night of April 27, 2006, or early in the morning of April 28, when two strangers entered my room and I instantly forgot about all the pain.