

# IMAGINE HEAVEN

NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES,  
GOD'S PROMISES,  
AND THE EXHILARATING FUTURE  
THAT AWAITS YOU

JOHN BURKE



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To Mom and Dad.

I love you.

I miss you.

And I'm so grateful for the touch of Heaven  
you gave me growing up.

Now you know what Heaven is really like,  
and I can't wait wait until our whole family  
is together forever!

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## Foreword

**I**MAGINE HEAVEN . . . imagine understanding it! I've found that people all over the world will show up to hear someone talk about Heaven. They will read books about Heaven. Whether they would admit it or not, everyone wants to know if there is life after death. After all, the death rate is 100 percent!

Since the release of my book *90 Minutes in Heaven: A True Story of Death and Life*—in which I describe how I was crushed by an 18-wheeler, pronounced dead for ninety minutes, and visited Heaven—people have often asked why I did not write more about Heaven. I shared what I experienced while there and nothing more. To add to my personal experiences would have been disingenuous and fanciful. What I experienced reflects what the Bible says about Heaven. Many other devoted Christians have experienced and shared similar glimpses of the afterlife. They have received every imaginable response to their personal stories—from pharisaical diatribes to blind acceptance. Some pundits have been condescending, smug, and even mean-spirited in their responses to near-death experiences.

So what is the truth about Heaven, and who is telling it?

The Bible has numerous accounts of people who died and came back to life. Should we really be surprised that modern medical science affords even more such miracles? With the avalanche of people who have come forward in recent years to relay heavenly experiences, someone passionate about the Scriptures should examine those experiences. John Burke has taken up the challenge. Rather than arriving at conclusions based on personal biases, he tests whether or not these firsthand reports of life after death are legitimate and accurate.

Finally, here is a book that clearly examines Heaven and hell, or what happens after we die. Across an amazing group of diverse individuals, Burke skillfully considers each near-death experience. And he concludes that these folks don't reveal such intimate life-and-death details indiscriminately. Indeed, they often do so with great difficulty. Many are reluctant witnesses, but witnesses nonetheless. All were astonished and transformed by what they saw, smelled, felt, and heard.

Three cheers for John Burke and his willingness to tackle this twenty-first-century hot-button issue head-on. He's done it with compassion, understanding, and an attitude of reaching out to all who are seeking truth.

It was my privilege to be interviewed by TV/radio host Sean Hannity a few years ago. He wanted to know about Heaven. I shared my thrilling visit to the gates of Heaven following my catastrophic car crash. Hannity seemed extremely interested. Then he posed this question: "Is Heaven boring?" His other guest on the program that evening was pastor of Saddleback Church and bestselling author Rick Warren. Warren laughed out loud at Hannity's question. "You can't be serious. Heaven is a glorious place. Never boring!" He went on to share the extraordinary activities of God's home.

Heaven is a real place. The more we know about it, the more we should anticipate it. As I have often suggested, Heaven is a

prepared place for prepared people. After presenting research combined with incisive commentary and critique, Burke asks the ultimate question: Are you prepared for life after death? It's last breath here, next breath somewhere else! Burke celebrates what happens next, if you are ready to go. He comments that people "can't imagine Heaven, so they don't live for it." How stunningly true! Experiencing Heaven is the most real thing that's ever happened to me. I did not want to come back. If you've been there, you don't want to be here. But when I did come back here, I intensified my efforts exponentially to help people understand the free gift of Heaven offered through Christ.

It is my fervent prayer that many will read this balanced, relevant, and penetrating analysis of the Bible's report of Heaven and these stories of the fortunate few who have experienced Heaven during a temporary separation from earth, and will embrace the utterly urgent need to prepare for their own entrance into eternity.

Now, *Imagine Heaven* . . .

Don Piper  
June 2015

## Introduction

**T**HE DOCTORS TOLD US my mom had only days to live. As she lay in the hospital for two weeks on her deathbed, I read the unedited manuscript of *Imagine Heaven* out loud to my sister and mom. I don't know if Mom heard it from her comatose state, but by the end my sister's comment was, "I want to go with her." I felt the same—not in a death-wish, morbid kind of way, but with a Christmas-morning childlike excitement for the exhilarating life to come. I hope this book does the same for you. Although all of us face death, not all of us have an expectant hope for the future beyond this life. I believe that is because we just can't seem to imagine it. *Imagine Heaven* will undoubtedly help you do just that.

Heaven and near-death experiences (NDEs)—when people clinically died, were resuscitated, and claimed to have gotten a peek into the afterlife—have been a hot topic of late. Usually we're asked to take a person's word for it, but I've never been one to gullibly believe every story of seeing Heaven. As a result, this book has been slow coming. Over the past thirty-five years, I've read or heard close to 1,000 near-death stories (there are

millions out there). I started seeing amazing commonalities across stories—intriguing, detailed descriptions by doctors, professors, commercial airline pilots, children, people from around the globe. Each gave a slightly different angle to what started to look like a very similar picture.

During that same thirty-five-year time frame, I went from engineering to full-time ministry. The more I studied the Christian Scriptures, on my own and in seminary, the more intriguing and confusing reading about NDEs became. *Intriguing* because so many of them described the picture of the afterlife found in the Scriptures. *Confusing* because individual interpretations of their experiences could wildly vary and even seem at odds with the Scriptures.

After reading hundreds of NDE accounts, I started to see the difference between what they *reported* experiencing and the *interpretation* they might give to that experience. While interpretations vary, I found the shared core experience points to what the Scriptures say. In fact, the more I studied, the more I realized that the picture Scripture paints of the exhilarating Life to come is the common experience that NDErs describe.

Some Christians say that NDEs should be rejected because these tales of the afterlife deny the sufficiency of Scripture and therefore add to God's revelation. I respectfully disagree, and I've included Scriptural references throughout the book to show how aligned the Scriptures actually are with the common experience. Do these experiences add color and detail that help us vibrantly imagine the Life to come? Absolutely!

Think about it this way. The Scriptures tell us that all creation declares the glory of God (see Psalm 19:1). But if you actually witness a glorious sunset of explosive colors, where the bluest Hawaiian ocean crashes into the majestic mountain-lined beaches of gold—now you've experienced the black-and-white words of Scripture in a color-saturated way that can glorify God

even more. Near-death experiences do not deny or supplant what Scripture says, they add color to Scripture's picture. But of course, like any gift from God, people can miss what God wants them to understand, misinterpret the experience, or even worship the gift instead of the gift Giver.

I include well over one hundred stories of people who were clinically dead, or near death, and revived and had amazing details to report. Some of them I personally interviewed, but most I compiled from reading. Given this, I cannot vouch for each individual's authenticity or credibility. Some NDEs I will quote because their reported experience correlates with other experiences and Scripture, yet I do not agree with their interpretations or conclusions. And even if some turn out to be fraudulent (like the boy who made up a near-death story for attention), this does not concern me, because the stories I've chosen could be replaced with many others describing much of the same things. I also do not advise forming a worldview of the afterlife from a few people's interpretations. But what I am trying to do is show you something amazing that I think God is showing me.

I'm writing from the perspective of a convinced Christian, but I was not always convinced. I've studied the world's religions, and as a former skeptic, my passion is helping skeptical people consider the many reasons that keep me believing. If you're still skeptical about God, the afterlife, or even religious leaders—this is the book for you. You will get a thorough understanding of the picture of Heaven from the Bible, but don't worry, this isn't like a theology textbook—it reads more like a novel. If nothing else, it will open your eyes to the millions of accounts out there that have convinced skeptical doctors, atheistic college professors, and many others (all whose stories you'll read) that Heaven is real.

Could people make up stories or fabricate detail to sell more books? Yes. For this reason, I've tried to choose stories from

people with little to no profit motive: orthopedic surgeons, commercial airline pilots, professors, neurosurgeons—people who probably don't need the money but have credibility to lose by making up wild tales. I've also included children; people from predominately Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist countries; and people who did not write books. Amazingly, they all add color to a similar, grand picture of the afterlife. And that's my main motive in writing this book—to help you *Imagine Heaven* so you'll see how wise it is to live for it, plan for it, and make sure you're prepared for a safe arrival someday.

Two days after reading this book to my mom and sister in the hospital, my mom breathed her last. My sister and I were in the room, hugging, blessing my mother, and celebrating with her—because we knew in that moment, she had come alive. Alive like she hadn't been in years; alive like she'd never been before! Alive like you've never imagined.

So join me on this journey, and let's . . . *Imagine Heaven*.

# 1

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## If You Only Knew What Awaits You!

**I**SAT UP WITH A START. What time was it? I looked at the bedside table but they had taken the clock away. In fact, where was any of my stuff? The train schedules. My watch! I looked around. I was in a tiny little room I had never seen before.”<sup>1</sup>

It was 1943 in Camp Barkley, Texas, and George Ritchie had enlisted to fight the Nazis. In the middle of boot camp, he got word that the Army would send him to medical school—his dream come true! The weather and training both took their toll, and Ritchie got double pneumonia the week he was supposed to ship out to Richmond for school. The morning he’d planned to catch the train, he woke up at midnight in a sweat, heart pounding like a jackhammer, with a 106 fever. During X-rays, he passed out.

“Where was I?” Ritchie pondered.

And how had I gotten there?

I thought back trying to remember. The X-ray machine—that's right! They had taken me to the X-ray department and . . . and I must have fainted or something.

The train! I would miss the train! I jumped out of bed in alarm, looking for my clothes. . . .

I turned around, then froze.

Someone was lying in that bed.

I took a step closer. He was quite a young man, with short brown hair, lying very still. But, [this] was impossible! I myself had just gotten out of that bed! For a moment I wrestled with the mystery of [the man in my bed]. It was too strange to think about—and anyway I did not have time.

The ward boy! Maybe my clothes were in his room! I hurried out of the little room and looked around. . . .

A sergeant was coming along [the corridor], carrying an instrument tray covered with a cloth. Probably he did not know anything, but I was so glad to find someone awake that I started toward him.

"Excuse me, Sergeant," I said. "You haven't seen the ward boy for this unit, have you?"

He didn't answer. Didn't even glance at me. He just kept coming, straight at me, not slowing down.

"Look out!" I yelled.

The sergeant walked right past George without knocking him down or spilling the tray—but how? Ritchie didn't care; his mind was fixed on not missing his train to Richmond. Medical school wouldn't wait. Determined to find some way to get to Richmond, even if he had missed his train, George headed down the hallway and out the door.

Almost without knowing it I found myself outside, racing swiftly along, traveling faster, in fact, than I had ever moved in my life. It was not as cold as it had been earlier in the evening—felt neither cold nor hot, actually.

Looking down I was astonished to see not the ground, but the tops of mesquite bushes beneath me. Already Camp Barkley seemed to be far behind me as I sped over the dark frozen desert. My mind kept telling me that what I was doing was impossible, and yet . . . it was happening.

A town flashed by beneath me, caution lights blinking at the intersections. This was ridiculous! A human being could not fly without an airplane—anyhow I was traveling too low for a plane. . . .

An extremely broad river was below me now. There was a long, high bridge, and on the far bank the largest city I had come to yet. I wished I could go down there and find someone who could give me directions. . . .

. . . I caught a flickering blue glow. It came from a neon sign over the door of a red-roofed one-story building with a Pabst Blue Ribbon Beer sign propped in the front window. Café, the jittering letters over the door read, and from the windows light streamed onto the pavement. . . .

Down the sidewalk toward the all-night café a man came briskly walking.

At least, I thought, I could find out from him what town this was and in what direction I was heading. Even as the idea occurred to me—as though thought and motion had become the same thing—I found myself down on the sidewalk. . . .

“Can you tell me, please,” I said, “what city this is?”

He kept right on walking.

“Please sir!” I said, speaking louder. “I’m a stranger here and I’d appreciate it if—”

We reached the café and he turned, reaching for the door handle. Was the fellow deaf? I put out my left hand to tap his shoulder.

There was nothing there.

Disturbed that his hand had passed right through the man, George leaned up against a telephone pole wire to think . . .

and his body passed right through it. There for the first time it dawned on him that he might possibly be dead. The sergeant who had not run into him . . . that man's body in his bed . . .

He decided to try to get back to his body. As soon as his mind was made up, he was leaving the city by the river and speeding even faster than before back the way he came. He got back to the base and began a frantic search for his body, room to room throughout the army hospital. He had been unconscious when they put him in the room. The loneliness he had felt in the unfamiliar city was now a mounting panic as he was unable to get anyone's help in his frantic search for himself.

Something was strange about time, too, in this world where rules about space and speed and solid mass all seemed suspended. He had lost all sense of whether the experience was taking a split second or lasting for hours. Finally, he came upon a man in a bed with a ring on his left hand, a small gold owl on an oval of black onyx. It was his ring! And the sheet was pulled way up over his head!

George had felt so alive, so himself, he had not really let it sink in that he was dead. Now it hit him. In despair, he sunk down on the bed.

The light in the room started to grow brighter and brighter.

I stared in astonishment as the brightness increased, coming from nowhere, seeming to shine everywhere at once. . . . It was impossibly bright: it was like a million welders' lamps all blazing at once. And right in the middle of my amazement came a prosaic thought, probably born of some biology lecture back at the university: "I'm glad I don't have physical eyes at this moment," I thought. "This light would destroy the retina in a tenth of a second."

No, I corrected myself, not the light.

He.

He would be too bright to look at. For now I saw that it was not light but a Man who had entered the room, or rather, a Man made out of light. . . .

The instant I perceived Him, a command formed itself in my mind. “Stand up!” The words came from inside me, yet they had an authority my mere thoughts had never had. I got to my feet, and as I did came the stupendous certainty: You are in the presence of *the* Son of God.

He thought about Jesus, the Son of God, whom he had learned about in Sunday school—gentle, meek, kind of a weakling. But this person was Power itself fused together with an unconditional love that overwhelmed him.

An astonishing love. A love beyond my wildest imagining. This love knew every unlovable thing about me—the quarrels with my stepmother, my explosive temper, the sex thoughts I could never control, every mean, selfish thought and action since the day I was born—and accepted and loved me just the same.

When I say He knew everything about me, this was simply an observable fact. For into that room along with His radiant presence—simultaneously, though in telling about it I have to describe them one by one—had also entered every single episode of my entire life. Everything that had ever happened to me was simply there, in full view, contemporary and current, all seemingly taking place at that moment.

How this was possible I did not know. . . .

. . . Transfixed, I stared at myself standing at the blackboard in a third-grade spelling class. Receiving my Eagle badge in front of my scout troop. Wheeling Papa Dabney onto the verandah at Moss Side. . . .

There were other scenes, hundreds, thousands, all illuminated by that searing Light, in an existence where time seemed to have ceased. It would have taken weeks of ordinary time. . . .

Every detail of twenty years of living was there to be looked at. . . .

*What have you done with your life to show Me? . . .*

The question, like everything else proceeding from Him, had to do with love. How much have you loved with your life? Have you loved others as I am loving you? Totally? Unconditionally?

. . . Why, I had not known love like this was possible. Someone should have told me, I thought indignantly! A fine time to discover what life was all about. . . .

*I did tell you.*

But how? Still wanting to justify myself. How could He have told me and I not have heard?

*I told you by the life I lived. I told you by the death I died. And, if you keep your eyes on Me, you will see more.<sup>2</sup>*

## Life after Life

George Ritchie did claim to see much, much more, which we will explore in the following pages. Beauty surpassing earth's favorite vacation destinations, people alive and active in a world not unlike ours, yet so infused with such exhilarating love, purpose, and belonging that it made earth seem merely a shadow of the real Life to come. As the loving Being of Light sent him back after his tour of another dimension, George said, "From that loneliest moment of my existence I had leaped into the most perfect belonging I had ever known. The Light of Jesus had entered my life and filled it completely, and the idea of being separated from Him was more than I could bear."<sup>3</sup>

After being clinically dead for nine minutes, George found himself back in his earthly body, but with a sheet over his head. Dr. Francy signed a notarized statement of his death that George would later produce whenever he talked about his experience.<sup>4</sup> In *Return from Tomorrow* he says, "I have no idea what the next life will be like. Whatever I saw was only—from the doorway, so to speak. But it was enough to convince me totally of two things from that moment on. One, that our consciousness does

not cease with physical death—that it becomes in fact keener and more aware than ever. And two, that how we spend our time on earth, the kind of relationships we build, is vastly, infinitely more important than we can know.”<sup>5</sup>

After this life-altering experience, George finally made it to medical school, worked for thirteen years as a medical doctor, and eventually formed what would be the precursor to the Peace Corps. At age forty, George Ritchie earned his doctorate in psychiatry. Years later, Dr. Raymond Moody heard Dr. Ritchie lecture at the University of Virginia about his experience. Moody had never heard of such a thing, but had studied Plato’s works on immortality while getting his PhD in philosophy.

Dr. Moody began having his philosophy students read theories on postmortem survival and found to his amazement that about one out of every thirty students came up to report something similar to Dr. Ritchie’s story. Moody started “collecting” these accounts, and in 1975 coined the term “near-death experience” (NDE), publishing his findings in the international bestseller *Life after Life*. Moody said, “My hope for this book is that it will draw attention to a phenomenon which is at once very widespread and very well hidden.”<sup>6</sup>

Four years later, I saw *Life after Life* on my parents’ bedside table and picked it up. My father was dying of cancer at the time, and even though I didn’t have much interest in God or the afterlife or anything beyond the next party, death’s reality was knocking on our family’s door. I read the book cover to cover that night, skeptical yet awestruck that so many people had these near-death experiences. Moody had interviewed hundreds of people who had stories of a near-death experience. While no two stories were identical, many shared common core traits. Moody described the commonly reported, overlapping elements:

A man is dying and, as he reaches the point of greatest physical distress, he hears himself pronounced dead by his doctor. . . .

He suddenly finds himself outside of his own physical body, but still in the immediate physical environment, and he sees his own body from a distance, as though he is a spectator. He watches the resuscitation attempt from his unusual vantage point and is in a state of an emotional upheaval. After a while, he collects himself and becomes more accustomed to his odd condition. He notices that he still has a “body,” but one of a very different nature and with very different powers from the physical body he has left behind. Soon other things begin to happen. Others come to meet and to help him. He glimpses the spirits of relatives and friends who have already died, and a loving, warm spirit of a kind he has never encountered before—a being of light—appears before him. This being asks him a question, nonverbally, to make him evaluate his life and helps him along by showing him a panoramic, instantaneous playback of the major events of his life. At some point he finds himself approaching some sort of barrier or border, apparently representing the limit between earthly life and the next life. Yet, he finds that he must go back to the earth, that the time for his death has not yet come. At this point he resists . . . and does not want to return. He’s overwhelmed by intense feelings of joy, love, and peace. Despite his attitude, though, he somehow reunites with his physical body and lives.<sup>7</sup>

I sat on my bed, stunned, after I finished reading the book. I remember thinking, *If there’s even a shadow of a chance that this is true, I had better find out—nothing’s more important.*

Funny how it usually takes imminent death or tragedy to think about life in light of eternity, but that’s what got me willing to explore. Over the next few years while studying engineering, I also put my analytical mind to work studying about God. I discovered there really are good, rock-solid reasons to believe for those who want to find them.

Since that time, I’ve gone from engineering to starting a church for doubters like me, because I’ve become convinced that

God loves each of us like no other, and that most people are just like I was—they just don't realize how great life with God can be, starting in this life, but even more so in the Life to come.

## **A Boring Heaven?**

I find that most people, whether Christ-followers or not, have a horrible view of Heaven. At best it's a cloudy, ethereal, disembodied, nonphysical experience—yeah, maybe with love, joy, and no suffering sprinkled in—but if we're honest, we don't really get *excited* about it. We can't imagine actually *liking* it. At worst, people think of it as an endless, boring church service, singing songs you're not excited about—forever! That sounds horrible to me, and I'm a pastor!

How you think about Heaven affects everything in life—how you prioritize love, how willing you are to sacrifice for the long term, how you view suffering, what you fear or don't fear. I'm convinced we can't even begin—but we should try—to picture how magnificent, how spectacular, how much fun Heaven will be—how much of what we love about this life and more awaits us in eternity. As the Scripture says, “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Corinthians 2:9 NLT). But that doesn't mean we shouldn't push our imaginations to the limit trying to understand.

For the past thirty years, I've studied the Bible, the major world religions, philosophy, and multitudes of near-death experiences. I've concluded that the core common elements of near-death experiences (NDEs) are a gift from God to color in the picture revealed by the prophets and Jesus. I'm convinced a main reason many people (Christian or not) live materialistic, self-centered lifestyles is a poor view of the life to come. They can't imagine Heaven, so they don't live for it. But all the

great heroes of faith “were looking for a better place, a heavenly homeland. That is why God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them” (Hebrews 11:16 NLT). Imagining and living for Heaven is not optional in God’s eyes—it’s the hope God wants us to hold in our mind’s eye.

We have the ability to *Imagine Heaven* like never before, not only by using our God-given imagination based on Scripture, but also our earthly experience (because God created this life too—his abode is not less spectacular). And now modern medicine is bringing more and more people back from near death to give exciting details that can color in our picture of Heaven and motivate us to live with eternal perspective. And that’s why I’m writing this book.

## Loving Life

My hope is that you will begin to see with this God-given gift called imagination that Heaven is not imaginary, but more Real than the world we know. Maybe you’re skeptical about God and the afterlife or you’re not a Christian. In full disclosure, I’m writing as a convinced Christian. But I wasn’t always convinced. I will try to show you what the Bible says about Heaven and how that lines up with what most near-death experiences report (not always with what they *interpret*, but with the core experience they *report*). I’m not seeking to add content to what the Scriptures already teach, but rather, help you imagine it, so I’ve included scriptural references throughout. Like watching a movie in high-def, 3-D, surround sound instead of black-and-white: you get the same content in a richer sensory experience.

Although I’m writing from a Christian worldview, we will also consider people’s stories from other religious perspectives. I hope you’ll travel these pages with an open mind, no matter what your background, because I’m convinced your Creator

loves you more than you can imagine—and you will love life with him!

Hazeliene from Singapore discovered experientially the truth of this statement when she blacked out, hit her head, and apparently “died.” She explains in English (not her native language),

I suddenly was in the very dark tunnel going up, up, up. . . . After passing through from that very dark tunnel, it has changed to very bright light. I had seen a very bright light, I thought it was sun, but it was not. I don't have an idea where that light came from. Someone spoke to me for a while, I heard, and that voice came from that light. You know what I felt when I saw that light? When I saw that bright light, I felt that someone loves me very much (but no idea who it was). I was very overwhelmed with that bright light. And while I was there, I felt the love, and that love I never felt before. That light welcoming me very warmly and loves me very much. My words to the light before I [revived] was this: *I wanted to stay here, but I love my two kids*. When I said this, I suddenly woke up. . . . Was it true that the light was GOD? Reason why I felt very overwhelmed? I felt that only that light ever love me and no one does. All people know only to beat me, hurt me, criticized me, offended me and many more. Nobody love me like that kind of love before. How I wish, my two kids and me could go there and feel that love forever.<sup>8</sup>

I hope you become convinced that your Creator has crazy love for you. But he won't force himself on you; he gave you a free will. He lets us decide if we will seek to know him and love him back, as you will see. I hope you will at least take time to discover what modern medicine and those revived from near death are revealing.

If you consider yourself a Christian, I hope this book gives you a better picture of Heaven than you've ever imagined. Jesus implored us not to live for earthly treasures and material junk that won't last, but to live every day with an eye on eternity.

C. S. Lewis once said, “If you read history, you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. . . . Aim at Heaven and you will get earth ‘thrown in’: aim at earth and you will get neither.”

In the Western world, we live for retirement. People have a vision, a mental picture in our imaginations, of what retirement will be like—a house on a beautifully manicured golf course, or maybe in the mountains or on the beach, with time to play golf, garden, boat, or do that favorite hobby, and time to spend with the people we love. Because we can picture it, we will work for it, save for it, sacrifice for it. There’s nothing wrong with retirement, but it only lasts a few decades at best.

What if we became people who have a vision for the ultimate Life to come? What if it’s true that this life is merely a tiny taste on the tip of our tongues of the feast of Life yet to come? What if Heaven is going to be better than your wildest dreams? And what if how you live really does matter for the Life to come? That would change how we live, work, love, sacrifice—wouldn’t it? That’s what I pray will happen for you as you get a clearer picture of Heaven. But first, what evidence is there that these near-death experiences are not just hallucinations or the last flicker of a dying brain? What convinced so many skeptical medical doctors? Let’s find out.