

Journey to the Edge: Faith and Near-Death Experiences

Part 3: Life Reviews and Negative NDEs

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Pass-A-Grille Beach Community Church

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Scripture: Ecclesiastes 12:14; Luke 12:2-3; Romans 14:10-13

I. The Life Review

One of the most frequent questions I receive when I insist that God loves us beyond our wildest imagination, and that there is no eternal damnation in hell, is this: “If there is no eternal hell, what happens to those who commit grave sins and live in opposition to God's will?”

I'm glad you asked!

Studies of Near-Death Experiences (NDEs) are increasingly providing two possible answers to this question. These answers are related—probably even complementary. One presents an afterlife scenario that, I believe, most of us will eventually face. The other is a scenario that, according to NDE studies, may be experienced by about 1 out of 100 people. We'll explore both possibilities this morning.

As we found last week, scientific researchers, when sorting through thousands of NDE reports, discover that NDEs are surprisingly common across all cultures, ages, ethnicities, and belief systems. These experiences occur in people who have been revived after being near death or even pronounced clinically dead. Regardless of background or belief system, the vast majority of NDEs are extraordinarily positive and affirming of what the great world religions have always espoused: that life is all about love—both given and received. If the NDE continues beyond the transition stage, where a person might travel through a tunnel toward an inviting light, the most commonly reported experiences are deep peace, a sense of unity with all things, and a feeling of being loved beyond one's wildest imagination.

Curiously, these positive NDEs have been experienced by all kinds of people, including those many believe would be the last to experience them. This includes not just people of other faiths, but also those with no faith or who were anti-faith. While some Christians insist that those who commit suicide or who are gay go to hell, NDE reports provide a strong counter-narrative to this assumption. Further, it's not just the saintly, but also those considered “sinners” – such as convicted criminals and even murderers – who have positive experiences.

On the surface, one might assume there are no consequences for our actions. However, even within the most positive NDEs, one common feature we only briefly touched on last week is the “life review.” I want to explore this further today, as it helps us understand one of the ways – perhaps the primary way – God deals with human sin.

Take, for example, the case of Tom Sawyer. Mr. Sawyer had an NDE when the truck he was working under fell and crushed his chest. As part of his NDE, he reports reliving every moment of his life, often from multiple perspectives – his own and those around him. Here's one significant incident:

“I saw myself at age nineteen, driving my hot rod pickup truck down Clinton Avenue. A man darted from behind a van and almost ran into my truck. It was summertime, the windows were rolled down, and I inched up toward him. I said to him rather sarcastically, ‘The next time you really ought to use the crosswalk,’ whereupon he yelled some four-letter words at me and reached through the window and slapped me across the face with an open hand.

“Well, I pulled the keys out of the ignition, stepped out of the truck, and I beat that man up, hitting him many times. He fell straight backwards, hitting his head on the street. I almost killed that man, but I wasn’t thinking about him. I was indignant. The guys from the gas station across the street came running over. I said, ‘Well, you guys saw him hit me first. And I very methodically got back into my truck and drove away.

“Now it’s life-review time! I can follow the adrenaline rush from the center of me outwardly, can feel the tingling sensation in my hands and experience the warmth of my face getting red. I can feel the rage that this jerk had violated my calm pursuit of happiness. I never knew that man either before we had the altercation or after. But in the life review I came to know that he was in a drunken state and that he was in a severe state of bereavement for his deceased wife. In the life review, I saw the stool in the bar where that man had his drinks. I saw the path that he took down the street for a block and a half before he darted from behind that vehicle into the path of my truck.

“I also experienced seeing Tom’s [i.e., his own] fist come directly into my face. And I felt the indignation, the rage, the embarrassment, the frustration, the physical pain. I felt my teeth going through my lower lip. In other words, I was in that man’s body, seeing through that man’s eyes. I experienced everything of that interrelationship between myself and that man that day. You better believe that I was in that man’s eyes. And for the first time I saw what an enraged Tom not only looked like but felt like. I experienced the physical pain, the degradation, the embarrassment, the humiliation, and the helplessness in being knocked back like that.

“After I stepped out of the truck, I hit that man thirty-two times. I broke his nose and really made a mess of his face. He went straight back and hit the back of his head on the pavement. Okay, ‘he hit me first.’ Try that in your life review! I experienced all of that, right to the man’s unconscious stare. My life review included experiencing the event from an outsider’s point of view from a third-person viewpoint. This all happened simultaneously, seeing through my eyes and through his.”¹

Curiously, Tom says he felt no judgment by God as he experienced this and other less-than-exemplary moments in his life history. Like a great many who report similar experiences, the only judge was himself.

Tom concludes from his experience, “You will be responsible for yourself, judging and reliving what you have done to everything and everybody in very far-reaching ways.”

Those who experience life reviews during NDEs tend to make significant changes to their lives that minimize harm and maximize good when they return. They do this even though they didn’t

¹ Bruce Greyson, MD, *After: A Doctor Explores What Near-Death Experiences Reveal About Life and Beyond*, St. Martin’s Essentials (2021), pp. 182-183.

feel God judging or condemning them, but experienced God's grace and love instead. Apparently, Jesus knew what he was doing when he offered grace and love even to his own crucifiers when he prayed for their forgiveness. As Martin Luther King, Jr., observed, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."²

Before moving on, I invite you to take a few minutes to consider how you would view various moments in your life if you were absolutely positive that God, like a perfect Father or Mother, would not judge or condemn you for your actions, but seek to free you from making the same mistakes over and over.

II. Hellish NDEs

Remember how I said that NDEs offer us two possible answers to the question of what happens to those who commit grave sins and live in opposition to God if there is no eternal hell? Here's the second answer. I'll acknowledge that it will appear at first to contradict everything I've ever preached about God's love, grace, and the non-existence of an eternal hell. You can be the judge.

While about 90 out of 100 NDEs are highly positive experiences, including those that experience life reviews, about 1 in 100 experiences are what might be called a "hellish" NDE. They encounter malevolent beings, hear the sounds of humans in agony and the like. The "hellish" experience I am about to relate is by a non-Christian. However, according to one major study, the highest number of those who experience distressing NDEs of one sort or another are Christians!³

Dr. Rajiv Parti, MD, was a world-renowned cardiac anesthesiologist serving as chief of anesthesiology at Bakersfield Heart Hospital in California for more than a decade before having a hellish NDE. From what he relates in his book, *Dying to Wake Up*, Dr. Parti's life was defined less by his helping profession, or his Hinduism, than by his narcissism, violent outbursts, and materialism. He consistently privileged wealth and status over people – even people in his own family – and even when these others clearly suffered for his gain. Here's how Dr. Parti describes a portion of his NDE, after first experiencing himself floating above his own body on an operating table:

My world turned dark, and for a moment I was relieved. I'm returning to my body, I thought. But that relief was replaced by fear as I saw a distant lightning storm off to my right, one that seemed to draw me in very quickly and soon became loud with the sound of thunder and ... What is that? ... screams and moans of pain and anguish as wildfire moved over burned souls that withered from the intense heat. I was made to lie on a bed of nails, where their needle sharpness tortured my flesh.

I was drawn in as if on a moving sidewalk that took me to the edge of this flaming canyon. Smoke filled my nostrils and with it the sickening odor of burning flesh. I was on the lip of hell.

² Martin Luther King, Jr., *A Gift of Love: Sermons from Strength to Love and Other Preachings*, Beacon Press, p. 67.

³ Bruce Greydon, MD, "The Darker Side of Near-Death Experiences," *Journal of Scientific Exploration*, Vol 37, No 4, Winter 2023, p. 692.

I tried to turn away and couldn't. I tried to move back but couldn't. Every time I stood a step back, an unseen force moved me forward, leaving me with a horrific view of the most agonizing place one could ever imagine ...

You have clearly not been making love, *I heard.*

I heard this message as though it were spoken in my ear. You have clearly not been making love. I looked around and could see no one at my sides. The message came to me telepathically, but it was so powerful that it may well have been spoken by God.

“You have led a materialistic and selfish life,” *the voice said.*

I knew what I heard was true, and I felt ashamed ...

Now, on the rim of hell, I felt my chance to heal the past was gone. I was drained of energy, frightened and ashamed. I feared the future and that I was going to be pulled into the pit of fire and burn for eternity. Yet at the same time I was steeped in shame at the self-centered life I had lived and the lack of empathy I had expressed for my fellow humans.

There appeared to be no way out, but I prayed for one anyway, My God, give me another chance. Please give me another chance.⁴

I don't know about you, but I find accounts like Dr. Parti's quite jarring. They challenge the foundation of my assumptions about God, which were formed in a profoundly mystical experience of God's love that I shared with a friend in 1981 that ultimately led me into the ministry. The experience of God's love was so profound that I knew God could absolutely wrap Love's arms around even the worst sinner and make them whole.

Frankly, it doesn't matter to me that only 1 in 100 NDEs are “hellish.” If damnation and torture are the permanent state of any human being no matter of how sorry they are for their actions or deeply they determine to change, this would mean that the God I experienced in 1981 – and have continued to experience ever since – simply does not exist. In that case, I had best “get with the program” and start preaching hellfire and damnation, lest I myself be tossed into those flames.

As you may imagine, this challenge has given me plenty of extra incentive to make negative and “hellish” NDEs a special area of study.

Now, many of you have brunch and other plans after worship, so I realize you may have more pressing things to do than sit in worship listening to a preacher talk about heaven and hell. So, I'll keep my remaining comments brief and encourage you to check my suggestions for further reading in the printed copy of this sermon if you're interested in hearing more.

Since eternity may be in the balance, I don't suggest you take the following conclusions as “God's own word,” but rather as “one sinner's best guess” based on what I've read and my own life experiences.

⁴ Rajiv Parti, MD, with Paul Perry, *Dying to Wake Up: A Doctor's Voyage into the Afterlife and the Wisdom He Brought Back*, Atria Paperback (2016), pp. 29-30, 34.

Here are my two conclusions:

1. Hellish NDEs cannot be dismissed.

I have read enough credible accounts of these hellish experiences to no longer discount them as mere products of prior cultural or religious conditioning, nor simply the negative effects of anesthesia or other drugs that may have been in a person's system when they crossed over – though I do believe both play a role in some circumstances.

2. If hell exists, its gates are locked from within.

In nearly every “hellish” NDE report I am aware of, when the individual realizes how badly they've messed things up and cries out for something or someone to save them, a savior comes. This savior may or may not take the form of Jesus or God, but one comes nonetheless.

In those extremely rare circumstances where a person is revived before experiencing such help, their salvation at least takes the form of re-entry into this world with another chance to get on the path.

So, to me, the central question about the afterlife is *the exact same as the central question I always ask about this life*. It's not about whether you or I are going to heaven or hell, but rather, it's about how much hell we are willing to experience – in this life or the next – before we finally surrender, completely and unconditionally, to the LOVE!

In Dr. Parti's case, a savior appeared in the form of his own father. I don't know what day his NDE occurred on, but surely it was Dr. Parti's best Father's Day ever!

Surprisingly, during Dr. Parti's childhood, his father had largely been responsible for teaching him how to be such a materialistic narcissist. Clearly, his father had changed on the other side. Now it was Dr. Parti's turn to change, only on *this* side of eternity. He made radical changes, indeed.

As Tom Sawyer observed, there are consequences to each and every one of our actions on earth. A small number of us will likely experience these consequences in more difficult ways than others. Yet in each and every case, what we can count on is that God wins, not the Devil. Love wins, not Fear or Ego.

So why don't we all make this Father's Day like that of Dr. Parti, and simply surrender unconditionally to the love, and offer it unconditionally to others?

For those who wish to delve deeper into Negative and “Hellish” NDEs:

Nancy Evans Bush, *Dancing in the Dark: Distressing Near-Death Experiences*, Parson's Porch Books (2012)

Bruce Greyson, MD, "The Darker Side of Near-Death Experiences," article in the Journal of Scientific Exploration, Vol. 37, No. 4, Winter 2023, pp. 683-698. (This article is readily available on the internet and contains extensive citations of research.)

In addition, scientific studies I have recommended in the past have significant sections on this topic. They are:

Bruce Greyson, M.D., *After: A Doctor Explores What Near-Death Experiences Reveal about Life and Beyond*. St. Martin's Essentials, 2021

DJ Kadagian et al. *Crossover Experience: Life After Death – 100 Exceptional Near Death Experiences*. Project Shift, 2022

Finally, three books recounting individual NDEs that I have recommended in the past also relate a something negative or disturbing that was part of an overall beautiful experience (Alexander and Tolman), or downright hellish (Parti).

Eben Alexander, M.D. *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon's Journey into the Afterlife*. Simon & Schuster, 2012.

Rajiv Parti, MD. *Dying to Wake Up: A Doctor's Voyage into the Afterlife, and the Wisdom He Brought Back*. Atria Paperback, 2016.

Vincent Todd Tolman. *The Light After Death: My Journey to Heaven and Back*. Ascend Publishing, 2022