

Your Best Life in the Hereafter



The Plains of Heaven, John Martin, 1851-3

Freddie Mercury was promoting a new solo album in 1985 called *Mr. Bad Guy*, and one of the singles was “Made in Heaven.” During an [interview](#) he quipped, “But I was not made in heaven.”

The interviewer chuckled at the flamboyant frontman for Queen, then went for the eternal jugular: “Do you think you’re going to get to heaven?”

“No. I don’t want to.”

“You don’t want to?”

“No. Hell is much better,” Mercury said, grinning as the interviewer chuckled. “Look at the interesting people you’re going to meet down there.”

Only a few years later, in late 1991, Mercury died of complications from AIDS at the somewhat tender age (at least in non-rockstar years) of forty-five. If he is indeed in hell, which he very well may be unless he had a thief-on-the-cross moment, I don't think he's finding it quite as stimulating as he imagined.

Interestingly his birth name was Farrokh Bulsara; he was born in Zanzibar to Persian parents but went to British schools in India. He was laid to rest (if you can call it that) with a Zoroastrian funeral service. The religion he was raised in holds that a person must appease God with good thoughts and deeds, or works, which is the exact opposite of what Jesus Christ taught.

Well Mercury-Bulsara is just another man, at least in a spiritual sense, who lived on the earth and then died, just like every other person. As Hamlet says, death is "the undiscovered country, from whose bourn no traveller returns." Michel de Montaigne wrote an essay called "That to Philosophize Is to Learn to Die." For unbelievers that is certainly true. Christianity, however, is much more than just another philosophy.

Any talk of hell seems to have its radiant fraternal twin, heaven, standing in the light next to it. Not all are condemned. But even some who profess to be believers seem to forget or ignore that Jesus not only said that "nobody comes to the father but by me," but "the gate is narrow and the way is strait, and few there be that go in thereat." Most people, in other words, according to the Son of God himself, who is that gate, are headed not to heaven but to hell.

For those of us who believe in heaven and hell there's a lot of debate, beyond that, about what those two destinations will actually be like.

Lee Strobel has now entered the celestial fray with a book

called *The Case for Heaven*, the latest in his popular series that started in 1998 with *The Case for Christ*. His first book recounts how he went from being a reporter for *The Chicago Tribune* and an avowed atheist to a believer, after he spent two years investigating the matter like a journalist. He *proved* to himself that Jesus Christ is who he said he is—God in the flesh, crucified as a sinless substitute to pay for humanity's sins, who rose from the dead three days later and eventually ascended into heaven, promising to come again to rule forever.

Proved is used in the legal-historical sense. A scientific standard of proof is misapplied to things that can't be measured, something that seems obvious but lost on, or willfully disregarded by, the techno barbarians of today. Francis Bacon, who created the scientific method and was trained as a lawyer, knew the difference.

The first time I seriously considered heaven was in high school. It seems incredible to me now that in the mid-seventies Billy Graham crusades were broadcast live on prime-time network TV. I was plopped in an armchair or on the couch in our working-class living room, watching TV by myself. My mother, a "homemaker" (as it used to be called), was busy with my younger brother, who was in his wheelchair and often needed attention; my father was working at the textile mill.

Before I go any further, I should say that I grew up Catholic. In other words, though I was familiar with Jesus in a general way, I had only a vague idea about the whole story, i.e., the gospel and all the details, which is how the priests seem to prefer it. Rock 'n' roll was my god for the most part, in terms of spiritual influence. So, while at the time I still went to Mass—the only one in my family to do so—where Jesus is supposedly sacrificed every Sunday during Communion again and again (contrary to scripture), I wasn't really a Christian at all.

Graham was far from the goofily smiling Joel Osteen, who these days sweet-talks his mega audience on TV and the internet, and his megachurch, about how they can live their best life now. Back then Graham was telling his viewers, and a filled stadium somewhere, in no uncertain terms that they were sinners, and if they didn't believe in and follow Jesus Christ, that after death they would suffer forever in hell.

What I remember most is when Graham looked out over that pulpit (I picture him the way he used to point his index finger at the crowd, his other hand clutching a black leather-bound Bible) and asked that if any of us died that very night, were we sure we'd go to heaven?

I can still hear his booming voice tinged with a North Carolina twang. This wasn't in any homily that I'd ever heard! It hit me right in the solar plexus of my soul.

You don't believe you have a soul?

The first pieces of evidence adduced in *The Case for Heaven* are for immortality and the soul. Strobel starts off the book proper with how humans naturally crave to live forever. The logical conclusion is that this instinct was hardwired into us by our Creator; the Bible says we are made in God's image. But unbelievers seek to find a semblance of eternal life by creating things that survive them—children, buildings, fortunes, art, etc. Strobel says a book by his source quotes social scientists who claim that *all* culture exists because of man's fear of death. I think that's extreme, but there's some truth to it as well.

Then Strobel turns to the soul, and a neuroscientist who is a believer. She testifies how consciousness is not merely our brain. Animals' brains, for instance, do some of the same things as humans, but lack the ability to reason about abstract concepts (like the soul and God). The soul is our immaterial essence, our personality or self, and the brain

acts as its conduit to the body.

Strobel has an easy, accessible style, but I was a little put off by his method. He tends to turn on his digital recorder and dump the conversation with his experts on the page, with his questions and reactions interposed. It's supposed to give a casual, fly-on-the-wall feel to his case. The overall effect can be somewhat disjointed.

Next Strobel sets out to prove that the afterlife is real with near-death experiences. In fact, he starts *The Case for Heaven*, in the introduction, with what he characterizes as his own NDE. He almost went into a coma ten years ago after a rare condition plummeted his blood sodium and caused his brain to swell. However, he doesn't say he floated along a tunnel, or saw a brilliant otherworldly all-loving light, or met or talked to God or Jesus or his own loved ones, or had a life review, or any of the other now-familiar props of the popular phenomenon. Instead he says he had "grotesque hallucinations."

Strangely, he confesses a hint of doubt in his own faith.

Suddenly, it wasn't enough to have a few inchoate suppositions about the world to come. It was insufficient to cling to some antiseptic-sounding doctrines that had never been adequately examined. I needed to know for sure what happens when I close my eyes for the final time in this world.

One wonders how Strobel could've written books about Christianity for two decades, and even served as a "teaching pastor," and not know *for sure what happens when I close my eyes for the final time in this world!*

He picks up the NDE thread in its own chapter, which I think was a very unfortunate and misleading one.

Of course Strobel invokes Raymond Moody, who coined the phrase *near-death experience* in a book called *Life After Life*, published in 1975. The problem with Moody, a former forensic

psychiatrist, is that he's not only an unbeliever, but a committed occultist. One of his later books is called *Reunions: Visionary Encounters with Departed Loved Ones*, which details how he helped grieving people supposedly talk to the dead, a practice the Bible condemns in both the Old and New Testaments. He also apparently believes he's been reincarnated. (Strobel, near the end of his book, easily discredits the recycling of souls). Worst of all, his NDE expert is a lifelong fan of Moody, first captivated by *Life After Life* when he was an adolescent and his father was dying.

After reading more than a few books and articles on NDEs, I am thoroughly convinced that they are thoroughly false. Of the many reports I've read, not one turns out to reflect the true gospel when the nearly departed supposedly returns to the here and now. Biblically it makes no difference that the NDEr is now transformed, in the world's eyes at least, into an angel of light. "And no marvel," as the apostle Paul might say, since Satan himself plays the same trick.

Finally at the heart of *The Case for Heaven* are the chapters on heaven and hell, which account for a third of the book.

So what will heaven be like? First, it won't be in heaven, up there in the clouds, according to the Bible, but right here on earth. The apostle John describes it in the last two chapters of Revelation as "a new heaven and a new earth." It will be a sort of second but updated Garden of Eden, which was ruined when Adam and Eve committed the only sin they could've committed (instituted by God so that man would be a free moral agent, not a mere automaton). Jesus became the second Adam, as Paul calls him, to balance the celestial scales.

Revelation goes on to say only a little about what this paradise will be like, but what it does say is glorious indeed. There will be no death, no tears, no sorrow, no pain. There won't be any night, or sun either, "for the Lord God giveth them light." God will live with his people, and "they

shall see his face," that is, they will have the "beatific vision," as theologians say. And as Jesus told his apostles before his crucifixion: "In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you."

So the new heaven and the new earth may look a lot like our planet does now, but with all the bad parts taken out. A true utopia, not some political fantasy.

And what's more, believers will be given a new body, a "resurrection body," that will be like Jesus's body when he rose from the dead and remained on earth forty days before ascending into heaven, even eating with the apostles. During that time he was seen by many people—including a group of five hundred. Even the Pharisees didn't dispute that Jesus had risen from the dead, since they had guards posted at the tomb and later bribed them, according to Matthew's Gospel, to say that Christ's body was stolen by his disciples.

How old will these "incorruptible" bodies, as Paul calls them, be? First, some believe we will look the same as we did in our prime. Augustine speculates in *The City of God* that we will be about the same age as Jesus was when he started his ministry, based on what the apostle Paul said about all believers coming to "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." Augustine says thirty years old is generally considered the peak of a person's life on earth, after which they start to decline.

Strobel's expert on heaven, New Testament scholar Scot McKnight, says "the Bible doesn't give us a high-resolution picture of heaven." Personally, I think it's enough to know that heaven, according to what John tells us, will be incredibly and unimaginably beautiful.

Which is similar to what John Calvin, as quoted by Strobel, says of hell too, but in the complete opposite sense; it's

variously described in the Bible with what are perhaps metaphors—darkness, engulfed in flames, gnashing of teeth, a lake of fire. “These forms of speech denote,” Calvin wrote, “in a manner suited to our feeble capacity, a dreadful torment, which no man can now comprehend and no language can express.”

Lastly *The Case for Heaven* addresses some common questions:

Will a believer’s long-lost pet be in heaven? Unlikely, since the consensus seems to be that animals don’t have souls like humans, or at least ones that outlive the death of their bodies. There will be animals, though, since Isaiah prophesies that “the wolf also shall dwell with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together ... ”

Will there be marriage? No, many say, since Jesus said, “For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry or are given in marriage.” But McKnight says Jesus only means that there won’t be “weddings and new marriages,” and that couples will continue to be together.

What about children who have died? *The Case for Heaven* gives this troubling issue short shrift, I think. But Augustine didn’t. In *The City of God* he says he believes that those who died before they had a chance to grow up—including aborted babies—will look like they would if they’d grown to full maturity, since their body was already programmed in the womb to look a certain way if they’d actually lived that long.

What about believers who will have family members in hell—how could they possibly revel forever while their loved ones are writhing forever? Charles Darwin mentions this aspect in his *Autobiography*, saying that since his father and brother and “almost all of my best friends” were unbelievers, he didn’t want Christianity to be true (though, strangely, in this context he doesn’t mention his wife, who identified as a believer). “We don’t know how God will do it,” McKnight told

Strobel, "but somehow he will deal with it ... C.S. Lewis said that God won't allow hell to have veto power over people rightfully enjoying themselves in eternity with him."

While these are reasonable extrapolations, Strobel includes some dubious ones too. For instance, he quotes McKnight about there perhaps being verandas in heavenly homes so the owners can sit on their porch and chat with neighbors and passersby. And not only that, "there will be parties—oh will there be parties!" Things of this sort do more harm than good, I think, and should be left to private reflection.

However, it seems clear to me that the new heaven and earths won't be bored, since boredom and joy are incompatible. It also doesn't seem that they will be at a 24-7 worship service accompanied by golden harps and a winged chorus, though believers will surely worship God and Christ and there will be sublime music. Adam and Eve had work to do, but it was pleasant work—tending the garden—not back breaking and brow drenching (or, as is more likely today, mind numbing and eye watering) to earn their daily bread.

Along the same lines the apostle Paul, who is certainly in the interim paradise with the thief on the cross awaiting his place in the new heaven and the new earth, said "to die is gain." The thing is, as we used to say when I was a wrestler: no pain, no gain. After all, Jesus told his followers that they would be hated and persecuted like their master.

But after a believer's last breath on this earth, the Bible says his or her suffering ends and will never return. For unbelievers, however, the *real* suffering is about to begin and will never end. "Abandon every hope, who enter here," Virgil and Dante read above the gates of hell before they entered "the suffering city."