

Lee Strobel

Evidence for Miracles, Angels, and Heaven

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Series: Preach
2 Kings 6:15-17

BIG IDEA - IF YOU ARE SKEPTICAL, SEARCHING, OR CURIOUS ABOUT WHAT HAPPENS AFTER DEATH, THIS MESSAGE OFFERS EVIDENCE-BASED REASONS TO BELIEVE THAT GOD IS REAL AND THAT ETERNAL LIFE IS AVAILABLE THROUGH JESUS

Thanks so much. Very kind. It's great to be back here. My wife and I both enjoy being here, but I have to be totally honest. I'm glad to be *anywhere* after what happened to me in Little Rock, Arkansas. I went to Little Rock to speak at a charity event, and this pastor picked me up from the airport.

We're driving along the way. We're chatting. He said, "Yeah. I told a young woman in our church, 'Lee Strobel is going to speak tonight.' She said, 'Oh, the guy who wrote *The Case for Christ*? Is he still living?'" So, I'm glad to be alive. Glad to be anywhere after that, but especially glad to be here with you.

We flew in from our home in Houston, Texas, where we live because our two oldest grandkids are there. I'm from Chicago. What do I know about Texas? Nothing. So, when I moved down there…no kidding…I went to Amazon and bought a book called *How to Talk Texan*. I'm serious. There's a book. I read it. The first thing I learned was the difference between *y'all* and *all y'all*, that *all y'all* is plural. We just don't use that in Chicago. I didn't know that.

One of the things I learned about talking in Texan I like the most is in Texas, if you want to say, "Thank you" to someone, you can say, "Thank you" or you can say, "I appreciate you." Isn't that nice? "I appreciate you." That's what I want to say to each and every one of you. I appreciate you. I really do. Wherever you're at in your spiritual journey, I

appreciate that you're taking time out from your weekend to be here to talk about what I think is really important stuff. So, thank you for that.

We're going to begin by going to kind of the sticky pages of the Bible, the Old Testament of the Bible, 2 Kings, chapter 6, to tell you about an incident that happened to a prophet by the name of Elisha. The Syrian army was stalking Elisha. They wanted retribution. They wanted revenge because Elisha had foiled their attempt to ambush the king of Israel.

So, they're mad. The Syrian army is after him. Elisha has with him his servant who kind of takes care of his life, and the servant is freaking out because he figures, "Whatever they do to Elisha, they're going to do to me. So, I'm either going to get enslaved or I'm going to get killed." He's very nervous. So, the two of them have gone to a town by the name of Dothan. We pick up in 2 Kings 6:15.

"When the servant of the man of God got up and went out early the next morning, an army with horses and chariots had surrounded the city. 'Oh no, my lord! What shall we do?' the servant asked." Elisha tried to calm him down. ***"'Don't be afraid,' the prophet answered. 'Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.'"*** I don't think that calmed down the servant so much. I think Elisha still saw that he was freaking out, so he took a next step.

"And Elisha prayed, 'Open his eyes, LORD, so that he may see.' Then the LORD opened the servant's eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha." In other words, he saw an army of angels that God had sent to protect them, and sure enough, Elisha and his servant escaped unharmed.

Here's my point. God gave that servant of Elisha a special gift that day. He allowed him to see the supernatural. When he caught sight of this otherwise hidden realm, suddenly his faith was renewed, his courage was bolstered, and the vision reassured him of the love and protection of the God who created all.

That's the title of my new book: *Seeing the Supernatural*. The subtitle really says it all: *Investigating Angels, Demons, Mystical Dreams, Near-Death Encounters, and Other Mysteries of the Unseen World*. In other words, this is a book that looks at the evidence. What is the corroboration that there really is a realm, like the Bible talks about, beyond what we can see and touch and put in a test tube? How do we know that that's real?

I look at several categories of evidence for that, and I'm going to touch on a few of those today to talk about how we can know with confidence the Bible is telling us the truth. There really is this hidden realm.

The first category of evidence are *documented miracles*. Documented miracles point toward the supernatural. Of course, the Bible is full of stories of miracles. Right? We know Jesus was a miracle worker. Jesus healed the blind. He healed those with leprosy. He raised the dead. Miracles are all through the Bible. Yet miracles, I believe, continue today. I found compelling cases of miraculous healings in peer-reviewed medical journals. I'll give you an example.

There was a case of a woman who was blind for a dozen years with an incurable condition, juvenile macular degeneration. She went to a school for the blind. She learned how to read Braille. She actually married a Baptist pastor. One night, they were getting ready to go to bed. She's already in bed, and her husband comes over to her, puts his hand on her shoulder, and begins to cry and pray.

He says, "Lord, I know you can restore eyesight. I know you can do it, and I pray that you do it tonight." With that, she opened her eyes to perfect eyesight. She said later, "I was blind when my husband prayed for me. Then, just like *that*, in a moment, after years of darkness, I could see perfectly. It was miraculous. Within seconds, my life had drastically changed. I could see. I could see."

That woman's eyesight remained intact for the rest of her life. She lived more than another 50 years. Four medical researchers documented her case from beginning to end and published it. It was the first recovery from juvenile macular generation of this sort ever reported in the medical literature. They reported it in a peer-reviewed medical journal. What do you do with that?

I have numerous examples and studies from journals, and so forth, in my book. I think we can reasonably conclude that a miracle has occurred if we have solid medical documentation, if we have multiple and credible eyewitnesses who have no motive to deceive, if there is no reasonable natural explanation to explain it, and if it occurs in a spiritual environment such as prayer. We have many examples of these contemporary miracles that, I believe, give us a glimpse that there is something going on in this supernatural realm.

The second category of evidence (this is fascinating) are *deathbed visions*. Deathbed visions point toward the supernatural. What's a deathbed vision? A *deathbed vision* is when someone is on the verge of dying and God gives them a glimpse of what is to come in the supernatural realm.

This is biblical. We see it in Acts, chapter 7, when Stephen, who's described as being full of the Holy Spirit, is about to die. He's about to be stoned to death. He looks up, and he

sees the heavens open up, and he sees the glory of God and Jesus standing next to the Lord. Deathbed visions are incredibly common.

One team of researchers went to a huge medical facility in New York State. They got all of the dying people together and said, "If you have a vision unlike anything you've ever had, would you please tell us? Because a lot of people are afraid to say anything. 'You might think I'm weird.' Right? No, no, no. If you have a vision unlike anything you've ever experienced, please tell us." Eighty-eight percent of them had a pre-death vision. I think the other 12 percent may have had them, but they died before they were able to say anything. It's incredible.

I was having dinner in Oklahoma City. There were seven of us at dinner who began talking about this. It turned out that four of the seven had family examples of deathbed visions. My wife… Both her mom and her dad had deathbed visions. Next time your extended family gets together at Christmas, or something, ask anybody in the family, an aunt or an uncle or whatever. You'll be shocked at how common these are.

You know, if these were incredibly rare, then a skeptic could say, "Well, yeah. Of course it's strange, but there are billions of people who die over time, and every once in a while there will be an anomaly." No. They're much too common for that, and we see corroboration that these are true.

Researchers took 3,000 of these cases and studied them in depth. They found that these experiences are "definitely not hallucinations, fantasies, or memories caused by grief. Nor are they projections of the subconscious mind or products of an overactive imagination." Again, we see corroboration that this is true. What do I mean by that? I mean there are many cases documented in the medical literature where people will see something in the realm to come that they did not know was there beforehand.

I'll give you an example. There's a well-known case of a woman named Doris. She was dying in the hospital. Just before she died, she had a vision of this glorious afterlife. She saw wonderful beings, as she described them. She saw her deceased father who had died several years earlier. Then she got this puzzled look on her face. She said, "What is Vida doing with my father? Why is Vida there in heaven? What's Vida doing? That makes no sense." Then she died.

Vida was her sister. Her sister Vida had died a couple of weeks earlier, but nobody had told Doris because she was so ill. They didn't want the news to kill her, so they withheld the news of her sister's death, yet on her deathbed, she saw her sister waiting for her in the realm to come.

Often (this is very common), people will see angels coming to escort them to the next world. Again, this is biblical. In Luke, chapter 16, we see Jesus telling the story about a rich man who had ignored the poor when he was alive. He died. He went to a bad place. Then there was a beggar by the name of Lazarus, and Lazarus went to a place of bliss. In Luke 16:22, Jesus says angels carried Lazarus to this place of bliss. We see this often.

For instance, there's a famous case involving a guy I got to know named Charles Templeton. Y'all probably know the name Billy Graham, the famous American evangelist. His best friend was a guy named Chuck Templeton. Chuck Templeton was an evangelist too, but then he went to a liberal seminary and lost his faith. In fact, he wrote an ugly book called *Farewell to God: My Reasons for Rejecting the Christian Faith*. He became the most famous atheist in all of Canada.

Well, I got to be friends with him because I actually wrote an entire book responding to the objections he made about Christianity. What a lot of people don't know is he later did come back to faith in Jesus Christ. But then he was dying. He's on his deathbed, and he calls out to his wife, "Madeleine! Madeleine!"

"What, Chuck? What?"

"Do you see them? Do you hear them?"

"What, Chuck?"

"The angels! The angels! They're calling my name. They're here in this room. I'm going home." Then later he cried out, "Look at them! Look at them! They're so beautiful. They're waiting for me. Oh, their eyes! Their eyes are so beautiful." Then with great joy he said, "I'm coming," and he died.

Some of the most compelling visions of angels come from children who are dying. Let me ask you a question. What do you think a young child imagines when they picture what an angel might look like? Like a cartoon character. Right? Like a caricature. Probably big wings, maybe a halo, maybe feathers or something.

That's what a little kid would imagine if they were to imagine what an angel looked like. That's not what dying children see on their deathbed. There's a well-documented case in a doctoral dissertation of a young girl who was dying. She said to her mommy, "Mommy! Mommy! Do you see them?"

"What, honey?"

"The angels! They're here in this room. They're coming for me."

Her mother didn't want to disappoint her, so she said, "Yeah. Yeah, I see them. I see them. Look at their big wings." The little girl said, "Oh, Mommy, you don't have to lie. They don't have big wings." She went on to describe them in great detail before she died. You would think that if expectations informed by culture and upbringing aren't causing the content of these deathbed visions among children, it makes sense they're coming from somewhere else, and I think the best explanation is these really are a glimpse into a spiritual realm.

The third category of evidence for the supernatural are *other contemporary encounters people have with angels*. This happens from time to time. The Bible, of course, cover to cover, talks about angels. There are 300 references to angels in the Bible. In fact, Hebrews 1:14 tells us the mission of angels is not just to glorify and serve God but also to minister to his people.

The Bible actually anticipates some people will have an actual encounter with an angel in this world. Hebrews 13:2 says, ***"Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it."*** My book documents several cases where I don't think you can draw any other conclusion other than "This person had an encounter with an angelic being." I'll give you an example.

There was a guy named John G. Paton. He was from Scotland, and he and his wife were missionaries. They went to a very remote island in the South Pacific to share Jesus with the tribespeople who lived on the island. The only problem was those people on the island didn't like the story of Jesus, so they kind of reacted negatively.

John and his wife were living in a little cottage. One night, a mob began to form of people who were coming to burn down their cottage and kill John and his wife. Well, what do you do in a moment like that? You pray. Right? So they prayed, "God, protect us. God, save us from this mob that's forming." They prayed all night long. By dawn, this mob just sort of dissipated and everybody went home.

A year later, John led the head of that mob to faith in Jesus Christ. They were talking one day and John said, "Do you remember that day when you all came to burn down our cottage and kill us?" The guy said, "Oh, yeah, I remember that day." John said, "Why didn't you do it?" The guy said, "Well, who were all of those men you had there?" John said, "There were no men there. It was just my wife and I."

The guy said, "No, no, no. Your cottage was surrounded by these big muscular men, all in white, with drawn swords. There's no way we could have hurt you that night. We all went home and went to bed." They both agreed they'd gotten a glimpse of the angelic army God had sent, just like he did with Elisha, to protect John and his wife. I think that's a

logical conclusion based on the data. So, angelic encounters affirm that there is a supernatural realm.

The fourth category (this may be my favorite) are *mystical dreams and visions* that are taking place among Muslims around the world, where Jesus appears to them in a vision or dream and they end up coming to faith in Jesus Christ. Now, this is biblical. The Bible frequently uses dreams and visions. God uses those to accomplish his purposes. There are about 200 examples in the Bible of God using dreams and visions to accomplish his goals.

Well, guess what? More Muslims have become Christians in the last few years than in the 1,400 years since Muhammad, and up to a third of them report that before they turned to Jesus they had a supernatural dream in which Jesus appeared to them. This is sweeping the Middle East.

Many of these countries are closed to the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is illegal to share the gospel of Jesus, and coming to faith in Jesus Christ can result in a death penalty in certain countries. So, there's no incentive for a devout Muslim to imagine such an encounter with the Jesus of Christianity that might lead them into Islamic apostasy and maybe a death sentence in that land. There's no incentive for them to have this happen.

But here's the fascinating thing about this. There is corroboration. There is evidence that this is more than just something in their minds. People are not going to sleep as a Muslim, having a dream about Jesus, and waking up as a Christian. That's not what happens.

What happens is they have a dream unlike anything they've ever had, they wake up, and that dream has pointed them toward someone else who shares the gospel with them and leads them to faith. That's confirming that this is more than just something in their heads. I'll give you an example to explain it.

There's a woman in Cairo by the name of Noor, a Muslim mother of eight children. One night, she had a vivid dream unlike anything she'd ever had in which Jesus was… Well, I'll read her words. She says, "Jesus was walking with me alongside a lake, and he told me how much he loves me. His love was different from anything I've ever experienced. I asked this Jesus, 'Why are you visiting me? I'm just a poor Muslim mother with eight children.' All he said was 'I love you, Noor. I've given everything for you. I died for you.'"

Then, as Jesus turned to leave, he said, "Ask my friend tomorrow about me, and he will tell you all you need to know to understand why I visited you." She said, "Your friend? Who's your friend?" and Jesus pointed to a guy who had been walking with them along

the lakeshore, but she hadn't noticed him because she was so mesmerized by Jesus. "Here's my friend. My friend will tell you why I came to visit you." Then the vision ended.

The next day, Noor goes to the crowded marketplace in Cairo, and she sees that man from her dream. She goes up to him and says, "You're the one! You're the one! Same face. Same glasses. Same clothes. You're the one." The guy said, "Whoa, whoa. What are you talking about?" "You're the one! It has to be you. It's you." The guy said, "Was I with Jesus in your dream last night?" She said, "Yes."

It turns out he was an underground church planter. He didn't intend to go to the crowded marketplace in Cairo on Friday afternoon because it's so chaotic, but he went that day because he felt like God had a mission for him. So, what does he do? He pulls Noor aside, opens the Bible, and shares the gospel with her. That's the external corroboration. This is more than just something that's conjured up in someone's head. This is pointing toward something verifiable on the outside.

I'll give you another example from my church in Houston, Texas. There's a woman from a Middle Eastern country where it's illegal to share the gospel. She's a teenager, and she is going through a tough time, and she calls out to God. She's Muslim, but she found nothing in that faith for her. So, she says, "God, if you're there, help me. Come to me."

She said, "I had this vision. It was like a motion picture being projected, unlike anything I've ever seen. It was like a projector, and it was Jesus." I said to her, "What did he say?" She said, "No, no, no. It wasn't what he said; it was who he was. I felt the love. I felt the grace. I felt the joy of Jesus." That had a huge impact on her, but she didn't know what to do with it.

She ends up marrying a Muslim man, and because Houston has the oil industry connection, they got transferred to Houston, Texas. Then she had another supernatural dream unlike anything she'd ever had except that other one. In this dream (this is crazy), she's up to her waist in a pond of water and there's a man with her who has a book, and he's weeping as he reads the book. She doesn't know what to make of this.

Well, one of her neighbors goes to our church, and Easter was coming up. This woman's Muslim husband was away on business, so she said, "Would you like to come to our church on Easter?" So, she came to our church on Easter. She was sitting there, waiting for the service to begin, and she saw the man from her vision who'd been in the water with her. His name is Alan Splawn. He's our pastor of baptism.

We introduce him. She's freaked out that she sees this man who she saw in her dream. She ends up coming to faith in Jesus Christ. Then, just as the dream had foretold, they go to the pond at our church and, with water up to her waist with Alan reading from

Scripture, he then baptizes her in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That's just in our church in Houston, Texas. This is happening.

This may be the biggest spiritual awakening going on on the planet today. It is so common that if you go to Cairo, Egypt, and pick up a newspaper, chances are you're going to see an ad in the newspaper, and the ad is going to say, "Call this number, and we'll tell you about the man in white you met in your dream last night." The people just keep calling.

From my book, I interviewed the world's leading expert on this topic. His name is Tom Doyle. He lives in Dallas and the Middle East. Tom said to me, "Lee, I could pick up the phone right now. I could call Kuwait. I could call Saudi Arabia. I could call Iran or Iraq. I'd give you five more stories right now."

This is happening all over the Middle East. I think it's God's way of saying, "You think you can close a country to me? I don't think so. I'm going to intervene directly in the lives of these people I love so much." So, I think that's a powerful example that something supernatural is going on.

Finally, the fifth category of evidence for the supernatural are *near-death experiences*. Remember, a deathbed experience is someone who's about to permanently die and they get a glimpse of what's to come. That's different. A near-death experience is someone who is clinically dead. No heartbeat. No brain waves. No respiration. They're clinically dead, but their spirit continues to live on.

They get a glimpse of things they see or hear when they have this out-of-body experience that would have been impossible for them to see or hear if they didn't actually have an authentic out-of-body experience. The Bible tells us that when we die, our spirit, our soul, separates from our body and goes to a temporary place. If you're a follower of Jesus, you go to be with God. If you're not, you're separated from him, and you're in this temporary place as a spirit.

Then, when history ends, when Jesus returns, our spirit returns to our then resurrected body, and we spend eternity, as Christians, in the presence of God in a very physical heaven forever. So, it's consistent with the Bible that when we die, our spirit separates from our body. Well, when people are clinically dead, their spirit separates from their body.

I was a skeptic when I began investigating this because I thought this sounded New Agey. Do you know what I found? Nine hundred scholarly studies about near-death experiences published in peer-reviewed medical journals and scientific publications over the last 40

years. It's a very well-studied phenomenon, and they have found no alternative explanation that can fully explain them away.

Again, we have powerful corroboration that we know these are authentic. Why? Because as I say, when a person's spirit separates from their body, their spirit sees or does things or hears things that would have been impossible if that phenomenon of leaving their body had not taken place. I'll give you a couple of examples.

There was a woman named Mary. Mary died in a hospital in London, England, but she said later, "I was conscious the whole time." She said, "My spirit separated from my body, and I was watching the paramedics and the doctors and the nurses working on my body, trying to revive my body. My spirit floated to the ceiling of the room there, and I was observing this. Then I went down a tunnel, and I was overwhelmed by a radiant white light."

In her words, "It seemed to embody all the concepts of love, a love which is unconditional, like a mother has for a child. I knew in my heart that this was God. Words cannot describe my awe in his presence. I could tell that he knew my every thought and my every feeling." The doctors were able to revive her physical body. Her spirit returned to her body, and she woke up.

Now, did Mary actually get a glimpse of a supernatural world? Here's the corroboration that something really happened. She said, "When I was watching from the ceiling these resuscitation efforts going on with my body, I noticed something. There's a ceiling fan here in the hospital room. On the top of one of the blades…" She couldn't see it from the room because it was on the top of the blade. There was a red sticker, which she described in great detail. She could only have seen it if indeed her spirit had been at the ceiling looking down.

The nurses are skeptical. They get a janitor. They say, "Bring us a ladder." They get a ladder. They go up the ladder and look on top of the blade. Oops! There's the red sticker, exactly as she had described it. That's just one of many examples like that. In fact, one researcher studied 93 patients who had verifiable observations while out of their physical bodies during a near-death experience. A remarkable 92 percent of those observations were completely accurate, while another 6 percent were almost perfectly accurate. That's 98 percent accuracy.

Get this. This is the most amazing of all. A team of researchers took 21 blind people, most of them blind since birth, yet during their near-death experience, most of them said they could actually see for the first time or had vision-like perceptions for the first time

in their life, seeing things they otherwise could never have known were there. I'll give you an example.

There's a woman named Vicki Umipeg, blind since birth. She was in her 20s. She's a passenger in a car. Terrible accident. She's killed in this car accident. But she said later, "I was conscious the whole time." Her spirit separated from her body, and she said, "I was able to see for the first time. I'm watching these guys and gals who are trying to revive my body at the scene of this accident. I'm watching this. My spirit floated out of the car, and I saw trees and birds and other people for the first time."

Then the doctors were able to revive her body. Her spirit returned to her body, and she was blind again forever. She's still blind to this day. One medical researcher said, "This is impossible according to current medical knowledge." Then there was this young girl, 9 years old, named Katie. She drowned in a YMCA swimming pool. No heartbeat. No brain waves. No respiration. She was dead.

So, what did they do? They took her body to the hospital and tried to keep it mechanically alive while they decided what to do. She lingered for three days. Then, remarkably, she fully recovered after three days. Amazing. But she said after she recovered she'd been awake the whole time. She was describing things. They said, "Wait a minute."

The doctors were skeptical. They said, "Tell you what. Here's a crayon, and here's a piece of paper. Why don't you draw the emergency room where we brought you when you were dead." She picks up the crayon and draws exactly the emergency room where she had been taken.

Then she said, "One night, when my parents visited my body in the hospital, I followed them home." She was able to describe what her mother made for dinner that night, chicken and rice. She was able to describe how her brother went into his room and had a G.I. Joe doll in a Jeep and was playing with that. She described how her other sister went into her room and was singing a specific song while she was combing her Barbie doll's hair.

She described where her father was sitting and what he was doing and what everybody was wearing, and everything was 100 percent correct. How do you explain that if indeed her spirit had not separated from her body and she didn't have this experience? I mean, this is consistent with what the Bible would say.

Here's the kicker. There's a guy named John Burke. Coincidentally, I've known John Burke for 40 years. He's a Christian, a pastor, but he's trained in research as an engineer. He researched 1,500 near-death experiences. Here was his conclusion. He said, "Yes, there's

variation among what these people experience, but there's a commonality too. There's a commonality to virtually all of them, and if you look at what commonly happens in a near-death experience, it is 100 percent consistent with the teachings of the Bible."

Another guy researched both deathbed visions and near-death experiences and found 47 areas of confirmation, consistency, and corroboration with the teachings of the Bible. Now, I'm not saying I base my theology of the afterlife on near-death experiences. I don't. I base my theology on the Bible.

But I take kind of a minimalist approach and say that based on what we can corroborate, I think near-death experiences prove beyond a reasonable doubt that the Bible is telling us the truth, that our soul *does* separate from our body at the time of death and continues to endure, just as the Bible describes.

Let me end with one sobering fact. Not all near-death experiences are positive. A significant percentage of them range from disturbing to terrifying. I'll give you one example. There's a guy named Howard Storm. Howard was an atheist and a very talented artist and professor of art. He was on the faculty of a major secular university as an art professor, a tenured position. He was dean of the art department at the university.

He went to Paris, France, to do some research in art, and he died of a heart attack, but he said later, "I was awake the whole time." In fact, he said, "I'm standing next to the bed where my body is when they pull the sheet over my head. I'm standing there watching this, thinking, 'What in the world is going on?' Then I hear from the corridor of the hospital someone calling my name. 'Howard, we've been waiting for you. Howard, you're supposed to come with us. Howard, come on.' 'Oh, okay.'"

So, he starts to follow them, and he follows them down a hallway, then down another hallway, and then down another hallway. Then things started to get foreboding and a little dark. Then they started to get angry and abusive. "Come on, Howard. You're dragging behind. Come on, Howard. Keep up." They're pushing him and shoving him. Then they attacked him and tore off his ears and gouged out his eyes.

He said, "I was reduced to roadkill." He said, "No horror movie can ever depict the level of cruelty they inflicted upon me." In the midst of that, he called out to Jesus for help, and Jesus came and rescued him. Then they revived his body. His spirit returned to his body, and to Howard, this was not some weird dream he had. No, no, no. This changed Howard's life.

He came back and not only renounced his atheism. He not only quit his tenured position as an art professor. He not only resigned as dean of the art department at the university. He not only became a Christian; he went to seminary and became a pastor. To this day,

he's pastor of a tiny little church in the middle of nowhere in Kentucky, telling people about Jesus Christ.

Now, what's interesting about that story is the Bible tells us in Hebrews 9:27 that people are appointed once to die and then the judgment. In other words, we don't get a second chance. When we die, it's not like… Howard was able to call out to Jesus for help. Why? Because he didn't die permanently. This is not the death that Hebrews is talking about. He was only clinically dead. He was going to come back.

So, he got an opportunity to reach out to Jesus in that moment. We don't get that unless it's a near-death experience. I mean, when we die permanently, that's it. We don't get an opportunity to call out to Jesus for help. So, the question is…*What about you?* What supernatural experience can you expect when you close your eyes for the last time in this world and open them in the realm to come?

This is so important. God does not want you living in a state of confusion, anxiety, apprehension, and fear over what's going to happen when you die. In fact, the very first verse I ever memorized as a new Christian was 1 John 5:13. It says, ***"These things*** [were] ***written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, in order that you may know that you have eternal life."***

You don't have to wonder. You don't have to doubt. You can know for a fact that when you close your eyes for the last time in this world your soul will separate and you'll spend eternity in the presence of God and, ultimately, in a very physical heaven forever. You know, the Bible can be a complicated book. It's almost 800,000 words, 66 books. It's like a library.

Have you ever tried to read the Bible from beginning to end? It's not easy. Yet, we can take one verse, 21 words, to summarize what the central message is that that Bible wants you and me to know at this point. One verse. One message. Romans 6:23: ***"For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord."***

The wage of sin is death. In other words, what we earn, what we deserve, the consequence of living a life apart from God, denying God, walking the other way, violating his commands… The consequence of that is death, which means eternal separation from God. That's what Howard got a taste of. It's not anything we want.

But, the verse says, there is a free gift of forgiveness and eternal life that's available through Jesus Christ. Why? Because Jesus, fully God and fully man, lived the perfect life, went to the cross, paid the death penalty you and I deserve for the sins we've committed. He paid that penalty as our substitute so he could offer forgiveness and

eternal life as a free gift of his grace. The question is…*Have you received it?* Do you know it's yours?

John 1:12 says, ***"But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name…"*** That means *believe* plus *receive* equals *become*. To believe…what? What I just said. Jesus died as our substitute to pay the penalty we deserve and offers forgiveness and eternal life as a free gift of his grace. To believe *that*. But it's not enough just to believe it. We have to receive this free gift of grace.

Have you done it? Do you know you've done it? Are you confident you've done it? Wouldn't it be wonderful if all of us in this group of people left the place today, knowing in our hearts that when we pass from this world we're going to be with God forever? Well, let's be sure. Let me offer you a prayer. If you want to take that step to receive this free gift of grace, forgiveness, and eternal life, repeat these words in your heart. God will hear you.

Let's close our eyes and bow our heads. If you want to take that step, just in your heart say, "Lord Jesus, as best I can, I do believe that you are the Son of God, and right now I confess the obvious, which is that I am a sinner. I know that. I've done things I knew were wrong before I did them, and I did them anyway. I've sinned. Right now I confess that, and I turn from that.

In an attitude of repentance and faith, right now I receive. I receive this free gift of forgiveness and eternal life that you purchased for me on the cross when you died as my substitute to pay for all of my sin. Thank you, Jesus, for loving me so much that you endured the torture of the cross so we could be reconciled forever. Help me to live the kind of life you want me to live, because from this moment on, I am yours."

Now, Father, we know on the authority of your Word that you have granted anyone who prayed a prayer like that and meant it this free gift of forgiveness. Someday you will fling open the doors of heaven to spend eternity with them. We thank you for that. We celebrate those who have taken that step today, or maybe they were just confused or unsure. Give us confidence through your Holy Spirit that we belong to you.

For those still on the journey, who maybe have too many questions at this point, use this church as a beacon of light that it might point them in the weeks and months to come to the hope that Jesus uniquely provides. We thank you for this place, a city on a hill that cannot be hidden. We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ, who is our forgiver, our leader, and our very, very best friend. And all God's people said, "Amen."