

## Dead Men Tell No Tales

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 4:6; 2 Corinthians 12:2–7

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Far too much of the present interest in heaven, angels, and the afterlife stems from carnal curiosity. It is not a trend those of us who accept the authority of Scripture should encourage or celebrate. Any pursuit that diminishes people's reliance on the Bible is fraught with grave spiritual dangers—especially if it is something that leads gullible souls into superstition, gnosticism, occultism, New Age philosophies, or any kind of spiritual confusion. Those are undeniably the roads most traveled by people who feed a morbid craving for detailed information about the afterlife by devouring stories of people who claim to have gone to the realm of the dead and returned.

Scripture *never* indulges that desire. In the Old Testament era, every attempt to communicate with the dead was deemed a sin on par with sacrificing infants to false gods (Deuteronomy 18:10–12). The Hebrew Scriptures say comparatively little about the disposition of souls after death, and the people of God were strictly forbidden to inquire further on their own. Necromancy was a major feature of Egyptian religion. It also dominated every religion known among the Canaanites. But under Moses' law it was a sin punishable by death (Leviticus 20:27).

The New Testament adds much to our understanding of heaven (and hell) but we are still not permitted to add our own subjective ideas and experience-based conclusions to what God has specifically revealed through his inerrant Word. Indeed, we are forbidden in *all* spiritual matters to go beyond what is written (1 Corinthians 4:6).

Lazarus of Bethany fell ill and died, and his body lay devoid of life and decaying in a tomb for four days before Jesus raised him (John 11:17). A whole chapter in John's gospel is devoted to the story of how Jesus brought him back from the dead. But there's not a hint or a whisper anywhere in Scripture about what happened to Lazarus' soul in that four-day interim. The same thing is true of every person in Scripture who was ever brought back from the dead, beginning with the widow's son whom Elijah raised in 1 Kings 17:17–24 and culminating with Eutychus, who was healed by Paul in Acts 20:9–12. Not one biblical person ever gave any recorded account of his or her postmortem experience in the realm of departed souls.

The apostle Paul had an experience of heaven so real he wasn't sure whether he had been physically carried there or merely caught up in a vision. He mentions the experience only once—reluctantly—because false teachers were challenging his authority, and this heavenly vision was a vital affirmation of his apostolic credentials. But he had kept completely silent about the whole affair until fourteen years after the fact. Even then, he framed his testimony as a third-person narrative:

I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into paradise. (2 Corinthians 12:2–3 ESV)

Despite the third-person pronouns, this was clearly Paul's own experience, because he shifts into first person as soon as he starts talking about how God humbled him in the aftermath of that experience:

To keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. (2 Corinthians 12:7 ESV)

The typical contemporary evangelical response to an event like that would be to write (or have a ghostwriter produce) a sensational account. It would be filled with specific details of what heaven is like and what's currently happening there. A large publishing conglomerate would publish it, and once it was clearly established as a blockbuster, they would start working on sequels and movie rights.

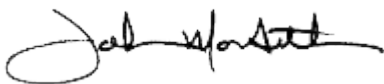
But having mentioned the *fact* of his experience, the apostle Paul declines to give any details whatsoever. He merely says that he "heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter" (2 Corinthians 12:4 ESV). He employs a Greek expression that means it is not lawful for any human to speak of the things he heard.

So Paul, who had been called to one of the most important apostolic roles in the early church, was forbidden to discuss what he saw and heard in paradise. The brief three-verse account he gives of his vision makes quite a stark contrast to all the currently popular volumes written by people who claim to have been to heaven and come back.

Why would it have been unlawful for Paul to describe what he heard in heaven? After all, Ezekiel, Isaiah, and the apostle John each had visions of the very throne room of heaven and wrote about what they saw and heard. Their accounts are even part of inspired Scripture.

*That is precisely the point.* Those in the Bible who wrote about seeing heaven were expressly commanded by God to do so and were carried along by the Spirit of God as they wrote (2 Peter 1:21). The relatively brief accounts they each gave are part of the God-breathed text. The Almighty Himself had those men record that information for our benefit in the precise words that He chose. No extrabiblical account of heaven can legitimately make that claim.

Those who demand to know more than Scripture tells us are sinning: "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever" (Deuteronomy 29:29 ESV). The limits of our curiosity are thus established by the boundary of biblical revelation.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John MacArthur".

(Adapted from [\*The Glory of Heaven\*](#).)

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