People are fascinated with the afterlife. Mankind seems hardwired with a longing for eternity (Eccl. 3:11), a desire to live forever, and to know, with some degree of certainty, what awaits us after we pass through the veil at the end of life.

It is therefore no surprise that when books which purport to tell the story of the trip to Heaven are published, they fly off the shelves of Christian bookstores and book distributors almost as fast as they can be printed. A retelling of the sights, sounds, and smells of a supposed trip to Heaven can land an author at the top of the bestseller list and produce enough speaking engagements, morning television appearances, news segments, and interviews on Christian TV and radio to keep him at the top of the bestseller list for quite some time. Touring Heaven has proven to be big business.

Don Piper got it started with his book 90 Minutes in Heaven which has sold more than four million copies in over twenty-two languages. Not to be outdone, Colton Burpo's account, Heaven Is For Real, has surpassed six million copies in sales. Apparently people are hungry for confirmation of the Bible's teaching concerning the afterlife. This desire for experiences which confirm the Bible's message is one of the indicators of the insipid state of modern evangelicalism. Not every Bible believing Christian thinks these "reports" are valid, helpful, or even necessary.

**Why This Review**

For a long time I have ignored these authors and the books they write hoping that each title published would be the last. The increasing sales figures indicate that this is no passing fad. It appears that we can expect much more from this genre in the years to come.

In conversations with various Christians who have read these books I have found that people have offered a number of different responses:

**Unquestioning Confidence:** Some find the source of hope that the author intends - an experience confirming the Bible's testimony. They delight to read a first-hand account which seems to increase their hunger for Heaven and their love for Jesus. They do not question the truthfulness of the account, fearing it would be on par with questioning the reality of God Himself or the reliability of His Word. Why would they question something that confirms the Scriptures? Shouldn't we be delighted that we have yet another confirmation that the Bible is true and can be trusted? Why would I criticize a source that supports my worldview and lends credibility to God's Word?

**Undiscerning Curiosity:** Some simply respond with, "I don't know if it happened or not, but wouldn't it be cool if it did?" Failing to see the danger with these books or their theological problems, they are titillated by the accounts. They are excited to read of someone's experience, thinking they can glean some truth or find some confirmation of what they have already found in Scripture. These folks are not necessarily convinced that what they are reading is completely true, but neither do they care. They are reading of an experience that confirms their deepest held beliefs. Isn't that a good thing?

**Unconvinced Criticism:** Me. I am not at all convinced that either Don Piper or Colton Burpo have visited Heaven.

It is my hope that publishing critical theological reviews...
of two of the bestsellers\(^4\) will help to demonstrate some of the serious flaws and theological problems with these books. It is my hope that by exposing error, the hearts of God’s people will be turned to the truth of Scripture, and they may be equipped to discern the dangers present with these supposed accounts.

**An Overview of 90 Minutes In Heaven**

On January 18, 1989, Pastor Don Piper claims that he died in an auto accident on a narrow bridge in Texas. While traveling home to Alvin, Texas from a BGCT\(^5\) conference held on the north shore of Lake Livingston via I-45 in a rainstorm, Piper was struck head-on by an eighteen-wheeler. The truck, driven by an inmate, a trustee at the Texas Department of Corrections, weaved across the center line colliding with Don Piper’s Ford Escort. According to the accident report, the impact was about 110 miles an hour. Piper’s car was crushed under the wheels of the heavy truck.

Piper reports,

> According to those who were at the scene, the guards called for medical backup from the prison, and they arrived a few minutes later. Someone examined me, found no pulse, and declared that I had been killed instantly.

> I have no recollection of the impact or anything that happened afterward.

> In one powerful, overwhelming second, I died (20).\(^6\)

Further, Piper claims that EMTs at the scene of the collision checked his pulse twice - once at 11:45 a.m. and then again at 1:15 p.m.. Both times, EMTs confirmed that he was dead.

Almost ninety minutes after the collision, another conference attendee, Dick Onerecker, arrived at the scene and took his place in the long line of backed up traffic. After some time he approached the scene of the accident and spoke to a police officer, “I’m a minister. Is there anyone here I can help? Is there anyone I can pray for?” (41)

Though he had already been informed that Piper was dead, Dick felt led to pray over his dead body (42).\(^7\) As Dick began to sing *What a Friend We Have In Jesus*, Piper returned to life and consciousness and began to sing along.

Dick quickly summoned an EMT who refused to believe that the “dead man” was now alive. The EMT went and checked on Piper, and this time he found a pulse. Medical personnel rushed into action to extract Piper’s mangled body from the wreckage and rush him to the nearest hospital. Then began the long and painful healing and recovery.

During the ninety minutes that elapsed between the impact of the accident and Piper returning to life, he claims that he visited Heaven. The book purports to tell that story.

**A Needed Clarification**

Fifty years ago, I would not have needed to say what immediately follows. However, in today’s world, any criticism of someone’s writing, story, or beliefs is automatically assumed to be an ad hominem\(^8\) attack. Examining someone’s theology or experience in the light of Scripture is no longer deemed a noble enterprise (Acts 17:11). People assume that any criticism of somebody else, particularly if they have endured a tragedy, can only be motivated by lack of compassion, personal hatred, or some vendetta.

I assure you that is not the case here. I have never met Mr. Piper, nor have I listened to Mr. Piper speak. I have never gone to any of his speaking engagements, nor have I read any book except for this one.

The concerns that I must raise have to do with the theology, the contents, and the underlying assumptions contained in his book.

As I read the book, my heart was truly wrenched by the amount of pain and suffering that Mr. Piper endured. Today he lives with pain and disability which still linger from the accident. He has not regained full use of his limbs, and the limitations are real and substantial. I do not doubt any of that, nor do I wish anything of what he has endured on any person living or dead.

I believe Mr. Piper is probably a very gracious man, kind, a great husband, and a good father. However, I also believe that the statements and assumptions of *90 Minutes In Heaven* deserve a thorough theological response. Despite his intentions, I believe that his story and others like it are detrimental to the faith and ministry of the Church.

Some readers will assume that I’m coldhearted and lacking basic compassion to publish a criticism of a man who has suffered so much already. However, no amount of suffering makes someone immune to criticism. I can and do

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\(^4\) See the Critical Theological Review of *Heaven Is For Real* also available at kootenaichurch.org.

\(^5\) Baptist General Convention of Texas

\(^6\) Don Piper with Cecil Murphey, *90 Minutes in Heaven: A True Story of Death and Life* (Grand Rapids: Revel, 2004). From this point forward I will simply cite page numbers in parentheses.

\(^7\) I will deal with this in a bit more detail later in the review.

\(^8\) An *ad hominem* attack is an attack “against the man” rather than against his argument.
sympathize with Mr. Piper's physical disabilities while at the same time express grave concern over his "story."

Mr. Piper has gone on the record and published the details of something that he believes was personally revealed to him by God. He promotes his books and tapes through various speaking engagements, his website, as well as other venues. He encourages Christians to not only read his book, but accept it as truth, gospel truth, and an authentication of the Bible's teachings. He advises us to take him at his word and to derive hope and encouragement from it. In fact, he claims that because of his firsthand knowledge of Heaven, he is able to prepare you and me for it (190).

Piper has made theological statements and claims. The book itself claims to be an account of a first-hand revelation of the realities of Heaven. Having sold four million copies, his book has had an immeasurable impact in the Church; therefore, his teachings, his claims, and his assumptions deserve to be examined closely.

**A Healthy Skepticism**

Piper admits to skepticism regarding other people's claims of visiting Heaven. Having watched others on TV relate their near-death experiences, he admits,

> I confess to being fascinated, but I also admit to being skeptical. In fact, I'm highly skeptical. Before and after those people spoke, I thought, 'They've probably had some kind of brain lapse. Or maybe there was already something in their memory bank and they just re-experienced it.' I didn't doubt their sincerity; they wanted to believe what they talked about.

I've watched many talk shows and read about victims who had died and been heroically resuscitated. Descriptions of their ordeals often seem too rehearsed and disturbingly similar, as if one person copied the story of the last. One person who claimed to have been dead for more than twenty-four hours wrote a book and said he had talked to Adam and Eve. Some of the things the first earthy couple purportedly told him don't measure up with the Bible (199-200).

I would suggest that the same standard that Mr. Piper applies to judge other claims of heavenly visitations should be applied to his own. Measuring Piper's claims concerning Heaven against the Bible's teaching will show that his claims are equally spurious.

Piper tries to place his experience above any skepticism or criticism when he says, "I have never questioned my own death" (200). Further he asserts,

> In the same way, some may not believe my account; they may think it was some kind of wish fulfillment during a point of severe trauma. I don't have to defend my experience. I know what happened to me. For those of us whose faith is in the reality of heaven, no amount of evidence is necessary. I know what I experienced (205).

Those words, whether intentional or not, place Piper's claims above criticism. What does it say of you, if you are skeptical and doubt the validity of his story? Does that mean that your faith is not in the reality of Heaven?

I would respectfully disagree with Piper's assertion. He cannot claim that his experience is proof of the Bible's teaching, gives him credibility, should be a source of hope and encouragement to others, and is a private, modern-day revelation, and at the same time claim that he does not need to defend his experience. No experience is above defending. I assume that Mr. Piper would not say that his faith in Christ, the doctrine of the bodily resurrection, the Scripture, or the truth should not be defended. Why does he think that his story does not need to be defended? He is called to defend the faith once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3), but his experience is above that? Why are we to believe that his experience is somehow immune to criticism and above skepticism? Piper expects you to take him at his word and believe him uncritically.

**A Paucity of Information**

One would expect from the title of the book, *90 Minutes In Heaven*, that the bulk of the book is a recounting of his time spent there. If someone purchases the book assuming that they are getting 205 pages of firsthand knowledge concerning Heaven, they will be sorely disappointed. Of course by that time you have already purchased the book!

The most striking feature of the book is the total paucity of information on the subject which is in the title of the book, namely, Heaven. Of the 205 pages, only fifteen are spent describing his ninety minutes there. The rest is a detailed and painstaking account of his accident, trip to the hospital, time in the hospital, release from the hospital, recovery, pain, suffering, medications, treatments, visitors, continuing physical disabilities, struggle with whether or not to go public with his experience, and all the people who have benefited from his descriptions of Heaven.

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9 Emphasis mine.
10 Of course by that time you have already purchased the book!
After reading the entire book, I can say that I learned more about the Ilizarov device11 which was attached to his left leg than I did about Heaven!

Ninety percent of the book is not even about Heaven. Apart from the occasional reminder of his time there (78, 79, 102, 123), there are only fifteen pages of the book dedicated to describing this place which Piper claims was “the most real thing that has ever happened to me.”12 He says, “Everything I experienced was like a first-class buffet for the senses” (25), and, “In heaven, each of our senses is immeasurably heightened to take it all in. And what a sensory celebration!” (28) Yet, the amount of detail provided in the book about Heaven would not suggest that this was “the most real thing that has ever happened” to him. He is not short on detail about those who prayed for his recovery, the Ilizarov device, the pain he experienced, medications he took, or the lessons he learned. But when it comes to “the most real thing that has ever happened” to him, strikingly little is said.

Piper could have easily written a book detailing God’s answer to the prayers of His people. That would’ve made a great testimony, and one of tremendous encouragement to believers. The book could have been an account of one man's struggle to survive and find purpose in suffering. That would have been a helpful book. It could have been the great testimony, and one of tremendous encouragement to believers. The book could have been an account of one man’s triumph over adversity, depression, and pain. That would have been an encouragement to many Christians. Absent the fifteen pages describing Piper's experience of Heaven, the book could have proven to be useful.

However, I am certain it would not have sold four million copies. Neither would Piper have been featured on TBN, ABC, and offered numerous speaking engagements. Without the claim to offer first-hand knowledge of Heaven, the book would not sell and this review would not have been written.

So why is Piper's account of Heaven not more robust? Why is the bulk of the book not about the very subject that it’s title suggests?

The skeptic in me wonders if Piper knows that the only thing that makes his story remarkable, and thus marketable, is his purported experience of Heaven. Is Piper afraid that offering too much detail might put him in a position of contradicting either himself or Scripture? After all, when you are making up a story, it is easier to keep it straight if you keep it simple.

Remember, his skepticism regarding other near-death experiences is based upon the fact that, "Descriptions of their ordeals often seem too rehearsed and disturbingly similar, as if one person copied the story of the last" (199-200). Ironically, that is exactly how Piper's account strikes me. His description is banal, generic, superficial, and lacking in details. It is exactly the kind of description you might expect from anyone who tries to imagine what Heaven would be like and is disturbingly similar to other accounts. As Tim Challies writes, “If you were to ask your unbelieving friends and neighbors to describe heaven, they would probably create a place very much like this.”13

On With The Critique!

For the sake of organization, I'll address the dangers of this book under four headings: Piper's Claims About Heaven, Miscellaneous Theological Concerns, Gospel Presentation, and Piper's View of Scripture.

Criticism #1: Piper's Claims About Heaven

No Jesus.

Only two short chapters of the book are given to describing Piper's time in Heaven, and much of that is spent recalling details from his childhood and telling the stories of the people he met when he arrived in Heaven.

Chapter 2, titled My Time In Heaven, describes the sights, the people, and the feelings of being in Heaven. Chapter 3, titled Heavenly Music, is given to describe the worship music of Heaven and the reason that Piper did not see God (33) during his ninety minutes there.

Numerous times in these two chapters Piper tells us that he did not actually get to pass through the gates of Heaven into Heaven itself. Everything that he experienced was outside Heaven’s gates.14 Before he ever stepped inside, he was sent back to the wreckage of his body and his Ford escort (36).

His first memory of Heaven is seeing a large crowd of people “in front of a brilliant, ornate gate.” They had gathered “just outside heaven's gate, waiting for me” (22).

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11 The Ilizarov bone growth device is an external fixator named after a Siberian doctor (Ilizarov) who invented it. It is used to make bones grow in length (68-69).
12 Stated in an interview aired on ABC’s Nightline Television Program. This segment is available in full at (http://abcnews.go.com/Nightline/beyondbelief/describing-heaven-pastor-don-piper-pronounced-dead/story?id=14214391) - time marker 3:05.
Piper never actually went inside Heaven. All he saw, heard and felt was outside Heaven's gate. The book should be titled 90 Minutes Outside of Heaven's Gate. It is not unfair to say that Piper has no idea what it is like to spend ninety minutes in Heaven, since by his own account, he never set foot inside.

The fact that Piper never actually went into Heaven explains why he can affirm that he never actually saw Jesus or God the Father. He writes, “As the crowd rushed toward me, I didn't see Jesus, but I did see people I had known” (22). Elsewhere, Piper says again, “I did not see God. Although I knew God was there, I never saw any kind of image or luminous glow to indicate his divine presence” (33).

Piper explains why he believes that he didn't actually get to see God,

The only way I've made sense out of that part of the experience is to think that if I had actually seen God, I would never have wanted to return. My feeling has been that once we're actually in God's presence, we will never return to earth again, because it will be empty and meaningless by comparison (33).

One wonders how the sights and sounds, the deep joy, the knowledge, the reunion with loved ones, the music, the food, the freedom from pain, anxiety, and sin is not enough to make this earth feel empty and meaningless by comparison!

This absence of the presence of God is one of the most glaring problems with Piper's account. How is it possible that one can spend ninety minutes waiting outside of Heaven without ever seeing Jesus? What is the source of Heaven's joy and contentment if not the very presence of the risen Christ? Piper describes a glory and joy, a “buffet for the senses,” and a “sensory celebration” (28), and feeling “perfect love” (27). He says, “All worries, anxieties, and concerns vanished. I had no needs, and I felt perfect” (33) - all without ever seeing Jesus or being in the presence of God. The “Heaven” that Piper describes is fulfilling, peaceful, joyful, loving, and alluring, even without seeing Jesus.

John Piper (no relation) in his book, God is the Gospel, asks this searching question,

If you could have heaven, with no sickness, and with all the friends you ever had on earth, and all the food you ever liked, and all the leisure activities you ever enjoyed, and all the natural beauties you ever saw, all the physical pleasures you ever tasted, and no human conflict or any natural disasters, could you be satisfied with heaven, if Christ were not there?15

According to 90 Minutes In Heaven the answer is a resounding YES!

Ironically, even while claiming that he spent ninety minutes in Heaven without seeing Jesus, Piper says,

As a pastor, I've stood at the foot of many caskets and done many funerals and said, 'To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord to those who love him and know him.' I believed those words before. I believe them even more now (34).

How can he believe those words even more now since, by his own account, he was absent from the body for ninety minutes and yet never entered into the presence of the Lord?

The contradictions on this central point do not stop there. Justin Peters16 recounts the following in his online review of Piper's book:

On March 29 of this year, my wife and I went to see Don Piper speak at First Baptist Church of Bristow, OK. Having read his book, I was quite surprised to hear him say that, in fact, he did see God “way down the golden road up on a hill on His throne.”17 This is a huge discrepancy. Wanting to make sure I did not misunderstand, I talked to him after the service and asked him why he said in his book that he did not see God when he now says that he did.

Piper: Really in the distance, yes, in the distance I saw Him.

Peters: But in 90 Minutes in Heaven you said, “I did not see God.”

Piper: I'm telling you now that I did.

Peters: Ok, so why did you say in the book you didn't?

Piper: I didn't say I didn't see Him. I, I, I, I was

15 John Piper, God is the Gospel (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2005), 15.
16 justinpeters.org
17 Peters' footnote: “I do not know these were his exact words but, if not, they are very close. Piper reiterated this claim…on May 27, 2011, on TBN's 'Praise the Lord' program…:‘I began to look up through the gate and I could see this kind of pinnacle in the middle of the city. It's kind of a hill high and lifted up. There's a river flowing down the side of this, well, it's the River of Life and it's coming down the side of this mountain, or hill if you will, and at the top of that is the brightest light I've ever seen and I know Who that is, it's the Lord high and lifted up.’”
looking from a distance through the gate. You could see the golden street, you could see the buildings, there are mansions, and you could see a hill with a river flowing down the side of it. ...It was just so personal to me and so incredibly difficult to describe (that) I just didn't include that. And that's one of the things I did not include. Let me tell you something, I didn't write the book by myself. I had a co-writer who writes. His name is Cec Murphy. So, there are probably some things in there that he interpreted differently than I did and that may be one of them.  

It is truly difficult to imagine anything more real and memorable than seeing God, yet Piper leaves this out of his account and is directly contradicted by his own book. This is not just a mere oversight.

Sights, Sounds, And Feelings

Piper claims,

Everything I experienced was like a first-class buffet for the senses. I had never felt such powerful embraces or feasted my eyes on such beauty. Heaven's light and texture defied earthly eyes or explanation. Warm, radiant light engulfed me. As I looked around, I could hardly grasp the vivid, dazzling colors. Every hue and tone surpassed anything I had ever seen (25).

He describes being enveloped "with a brilliance beyond earthly comprehension or description" (21). Things were “brilliantly intense,” “utterly luminous,” a “brilliance that was brighter than the light that surrounded us” (27), and a “bright iridescence” (33).

Piper describes the joy of Heaven (26) and a love that “emanated from every person who surrounded [him]” (27). He laments the limits of “earthly terms to refer to unimaginable joy, excitement, warmth, and total happiness.” (24) The music that he heard filled his heart with “the deepest joy I've ever experienced” and he felt the “joy and exuberance” of the Heavenly worship (31). “Hymns of praise, modern-sounding choruses, and ancient chants filled my ears and brought not only a deep peace but the greatest feeling of joy I've ever experienced” (31). Remember, all of this without ever seeing Jesus!

Contradictory Statements - Memory

Piper repeatedly affirms that his experience in Heaven was lived out in a heightened state of awareness and knowledge. Consider the following:

Everything I experienced was like a first-class buffet for the senses. ... With all the heightened awareness of my senses, I felt as if I had never seen, heard, or felt anything so real before (25).

“In heaven, each of our senses is immeasurably heightened to take it all in. And what a sensory celebration!” (28)

“Maybe it was because my senses were so engaged that I feasted on everything at the same time” (30).

In an interview on ABC, Piper said going to Heaven was “the most real thing that has ever happened to me.”

Yet despite the fact that his senses were “immeasurably heightened to take it all in,” there is so much that he doesn't seem to recall. It seems that the only thing imperfect about him during his ninety minutes in Heaven is his memory.

For instance, the first person Piper supposedly saw was his grandfather. Upon seeing him, Piper confesses,

I may have called his name, but I'm not sure. After being hugged by my grandfather, I don't remember who was second or third (23).

He says that people were excited and overjoyed to see him, but “I'm not sure if they actually said the words or not, but I knew they had been waiting and expecting me” (25).

When feeling love from those who welcomed him, he writes, “They didn't say they loved me. I don't remember what words they spoke” (27). But he felt it emanate from them.

One glaring contradiction occurs in two sentences right next to each other:

With all the heightened awareness of my senses, I felt as if I had never seen, heard, or felt anything so real before. I don't recall that I tasted anything, yet I knew that if I had, that too would have been more glorious than anything I had eaten or drunk on earth.

He has never experienced anything so real before, but

18 You can access Justin Peters' review at http://worldviewweekend.com/worldview-times/article.php?articleid=7575#_ftnref29

Peters' footnote: For the sake of accuracy, I recorded the audio of this conversation.

19 Stated in an interview aired on ABC's Nightline Television Program. This segment is available in full at (http://abcnews.go.com/Nightline/beyondbelief/describing-heaven-pastor-don-piper-pronounced-dead/story?id=14214140#.T9-ZbZHNIIY) - time marker 3:05.
he can't recall if he ate anything. That is a lot of uncertainty and lack of memory for someone whose senses were “immeasurably heightened” so he could “take it all in” during the “most real thing that has ever happened” to him.

Contradictory Statements - Knowledge

Piper claims that while in Heaven,

I asked no questions and never wondered about anything. Everything was perfect. I sensed that I knew everything and had no questions to ask (30).

There are a few things that Piper seems to have intuitively known. For instance, “...I also knew that in heaven there is no sense of time passing” (25).

He knew that those selected to welcome him to Heaven had been selected because of the spiritual impact they had on him in this life.

I knew - again one of those thing I knew without being aware of how I had absorbed that information - that because of their influence I was able to be present with them in heaven (26).

No one said it, but I simply knew God had sent all those people to escort me inside the portals of heaven (34).

Though he never saw angels, he did hear the “swishing” of their wings. “As I listened I simply knew what it was” (30).

Yet for someone who sensed that he knew everything and had no questions, he sure confesses to have not known a lot! He wasn’t sure of the nature of the music he heard, whether it was a voice or something instrumental (30-31). He did not even know who was singing the glorious music, angels or humans (31). He didn’t know why his grandfather was the first person he saw (23). He had no idea how old some people in Heaven were (26). He did not know how many songs were being sung simultaneously in Heaven (32). When asked, “How did you move? Did you walk? Did you float?” Piper responds, “I don't know” (35).

That is a whole lot of not knowing for someone who sensed he knew everything. It is a lot of unanswered questions for someone who “had no questions to ask” (30).

Contradictory Statements - Pain

Piper highlights one person in his “greeting committee” who was a childhood friend. This particular friend was killed in a car wreck after high school. He writes,

When I attended his funeral, I wondered if I would ever stop crying...Through the years since then, I had never been able to forget the pain and sense of loss. Not that I thought of him all the time, but when I did, sadness came over me.

Now I saw Mike in heaven. As he slipped his arm around my shoulder, my pain and grief vanished (23).

Piper seems to be saying that even while in Heaven he was aware of the pain and grief that accompanied that memory until Mike put his arm around him. Only then did that grief vanish.

In spite of the fact that he recounts feeling this pain and grief while in Heaven, Piper later records,

I wasn't conscious of anything I'd left behind and felt no regrets about leaving family or possessions. It was as if God had removed anything negative or worrisome from my consciousness, and I could only rejoice at being together with these wonderful people (26).

Oh yeah, except there was that pain and grief over Mike that didn’t vanish until some time into the ninety minutes.

Misplaced Hope - A Big Family Reunion

Piper tries to paint a picture of Heaven intended to thrill us with anticipation. Yet, as already noted, he leaves out the most thrilling part of Heaven - Jesus. The appeal of Piper's Heaven seems to come from the hope of being with people we knew in this life.

A great deal of time is spent recounting how thrilled people were to see him and how joyful he was to see people like his grandfather, his friend Mike, and his great-grandmother, Hattie Mann. The predominant highlight of his ninety Minutes centers around these people. Piper writes, “He and everyone that followed praised God and told me how excited they were to see me and to welcome me to heaven and to the fellowship they enjoyed” (24).

All the Piper family reunions at the park in Monticello, Arkansas paled in comparison to this reunion.

None of those earthly family reunions, however, prepared me for the sublime gathering of saints I experienced at the gates of heaven. Those who had gathered at Monticello were some of the same people waiting for me at the gates of heaven. Heaven was many things, but without a doubt, it was the greatest family reunion of all (25).
What did they talk about? “Our conversations centered on the joy of my being there and how happy they were to see me” (26). He describes being with the people as “the most human warmth and friendliness I’ve ever witnessed. Just being with them was a holy moment and remains a treasured hope” (27).

What is Piper’s “treasured hope?” Being with his departed loved ones. What about Jesus? What about God?

That is the joy of Piper’s Heaven - a family reunion where the conversation centers on the joy of being there and being so happy to see each other again. I guess that is all you have when Jesus is conspicuously absent. The real joy of Heaven will be the glory and presence of Christ - even without our loved ones! (2 Corinthians 5:1-9; Philippians 1:21)

Yet, even the family reunion is not what Piper looks forward to most. In Chapter 3, which describes the music of Heaven, Piper confesses,

As I've pondered the meaning of the memory of the music, it seems curious. I would have expected the most memorable experience to be something I had seen or the physical embrace of a loved one. Yet above everything else, I cherish those sounds, and at times I think, I can't wait to hear them again - in person. It's what I look forward to. I want to see everybody, but I know I'll be with them forever. I want to experience everything heaven offers, but most of all, I want to hear those never ending songs again.

This is Piper's Heaven. The deepest sense of joy comes not from being in God's presence and coming to know Him, but from being welcomed by family and friends who have already gone to Heaven. That which we have to anticipate above all else is not seeing Jesus and bowing before Him, but hearing the music of Heaven.

This is a pathetically low, sad, man-centered, Christ-less view of Heaven and its joys. It offers thrills and excitements which are superficial, shallow, banal, and childish - excitements which would appeal to only the most immature of Christians. Then again, that certainly appears to be his intended audience.

Age In Heaven

Piper makes some claims about the ravages of age upon those in Heaven.

The first person he recognized in Heaven was his grandfather, Joe Kulbeth. Piper claims, “He looked exactly as I remembered him, with his shock of white hair and what I called a big banana nose” (22). The “white hair” appears to be an indicator of age.

Piper later claims, “I became aware of the wide variety of ages - old and young and every age in-between” (24).

Then, when Piper saw his great-grandmother, Hattie Mann, he noticed that she stood strong and upright, and the wrinkles had been erased from her face. I have no idea what age she was, and I didn't even think about that. As I stared at her beaming face, I sensed that age has no meaning in heaven (26).

In an equally confusing explanation, Piper says, Age expresses time passing, and there is no time there. All of the people I encountered were the same age they had been the last time I had seen them - except that all the ravages of living on earth had vanished (27).

So which is it? Does everyone have varying ages that we can recognize, and become aware of, or does age have no meaning in Heaven? How is it that he was aware of different ages and yet didn't even think about age since it had no meaning? If age has no meaning, how did he know they were the same age as when they departed earth?

Isn't age a ravage of living on earth? He wants to say that age has no meaning, but then he comments on the varying ages of the people he met and how their age appeared in Heaven. This is such convoluted, contradictory nonsense as to make one wonder why anyone would take it seriously.

No Time In Heaven

Repeatedly, Piper makes the claim that there is no time in Heaven. For instance:

Time had no meaning (24).

...yet I also knew that in heaven there is no sense of time passing (25).

Age expresses time passing, and there is no time there (27).

In those minutes - and they held no sense of time
for me - others touched me (33).

For them, time is not passing. Everything is in the eternal now - even if I can't put that into words. Even if ten more years pass, or thirty, in heaven it will be only an instant before I'm back there again (196).

If Piper had read Revelation before fabricating his story, he might not have made this elementary mistake. The present Heaven does experience time. In John's inspired record of his actual revelation of the real Heaven, he writes,

> When the Lamb broke the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained; and they cried out with a loud voice, saying, “How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” And there was given to each of them a white robe; and they were told that they should rest for a little while longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren who were to be killed even as they had been, would be completed also (Revelation 6:9-11)."  

The martyred saints in Heaven are clearly aware that time is passing on earth and in Heaven. In fact, the question that they ask only makes sense if they are well aware of time passing between their martyrdom and the execution of the just judgment of God. That is why they ask the question, "How long?" That is a time question.

The answer that the saints got is also a time related answer. They were told that they should "rest for a little while longer." So much for time having no meaning in Heaven. Piper claims that in Heaven there is no sense of time passing. John, the inspired apostle, disagrees.

This is sufficient to show that either Piper has been deceived in his "vision" or he is intentionally deceiving others, having fabricated the entire story out of whole cloth.

The Songs

Another glaring contradiction to Scripture is contained in Piper's claim concerning the type of music that is used in Heaven for worship. He writes,

> Many of the old hymns and choruses I had sung at various times in my life were part of the music - along with hundreds of songs I had never heard before. Hymns of praise, modern-sounding choruses, and ancient chants filled my ears and brought not only a deep peace but the greatest feeling of joy I've ever experienced.

As I stood before the gate, I didn't think of it, but later I realized that I didn't hear such songs as The Old Rugged Cross or The Nail-Scarred Hand. None of the hymns that filled the air were about Jesus' sacrifice or death. I heard no sad songs and instinctively knew that there are no sad songs in heaven. Why would there be? All were praises about Christ's reign as King of Kings and our joyful worship for all that he has done for us and how wonderful he is (31).

There are a number of obvious problems with Piper's claim. First, is not the death and sacrifice of Jesus part of "all that he has done for us and how wonderful he is"? Does not His death demonstrate just how wonderful He is? And is not His death the theological center of what He has done on behalf of His people? He came to give His life as a ransom for many and to die on behalf of us - to bear the wrath of God in the place of sinners (Mark 10:45; 1 Peter 2:24-25). How can the worship of Heaven not center around that redemptive purchase?

It seems that the Heaven Piper describes is not just absent Jesus, but a place utterly uncentered with the crowning jewel of God's glory - the cross.

Second, Piper asserts there are no sad songs in Heaven and so they don't sing about the sacrificial death of Christ. Piper's thinking on this issue is more than a bit juvenile. Since when does singing about the sacrifice of Christ bring sadness? Why should it? Singing about the atoning work of the Divine Son on behalf of His people should fill our hearts with joy, thankfulness, and hope. Why would Heaven's view of that act bring feelings of sadness? Why would those in Heaven who have been brought there by the death of Christ feel sadness when reflecting on that reality instead of joy and happiness? They have a sinless, perfect perspective on that event. They see the glory of God, the joy and rejoicing, the good of God's people, the vindication of His justice, the magnification of His grace, and the wisdom of His actions.

With obvious cognitive disconnect, Piper claims during one of his speaking engagements that Jesus is the only person in Heaven with scars. He then explains, "This is to

22 Scripture references taken from the New American Standard Bible, 1995 Update, unless otherwise noted. Emphasis Mine.

23 Emphasis mine.
remind the rest of us how we got there."²⁴

But wouldn't that make us sad? If singing of His sacrifice would make me sad, how much more, seeing the very visible evidence of the cross and His death on it? Why are there no sad songs, but there are sad scars? If songs about the sacrifice of Christ would make me sad and keep me from appropriately rejoicing, what will the scars do if I am constantly reminded of what He did? If Piper were giving us an account of a true revelation of Heaven, we would not find these types of inconsistencies and contradictions.

Remembering and rejoicing in the sacrificial death of Christ will be part of our worship, which Piper would know if he had consulted an actual revelation of Heaven before writing his book.

Third, this assertion directly contradicts the inspired revelation of Heaven given through the Apostle John in the book of Revelation. Unlike Piper, John actually went to Heaven, saw the throne of God, and witnessed the worship in Heaven. Revelation 4-5 is the record of that worship.

John records that when the Lamb took the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb and sang a new song saying,

Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom of priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth.²⁵

Then John looked and he heard the voice of many angels around the throne and the living creatures and the elders; and the number of them was myriads of myriads, and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice,"Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing."²⁶

According to Piper they don't sing about the death or sacrifice of Jesus. According to Scripture, Heaven does sing praise to the Lamb who was slain, and the songs do mention the death and sacrifice of Jesus. In fact, according to Scripture, even the angels join in singing about the slaying of the Lamb. Who will you believe, Piper or Scripture?

This blatant contradiction of Scripture is enough to show that either Piper has knowingly fabricated his entire story, or he was deceived by what he saw. Whatever it was, it was not Heaven.

Fourth, not only does Scripture record worship in Heaven which celebrates the death of Christ, but the book of Revelation speaks consistently and constantly of Jesus in such a way as to commemorate and celebrate His sacrificial death.

One of the major themes of Revelation is the references to Jesus as "the Lamb." John uses that title thirty-two times in thirty verses in Revelation.²⁷ The very portrayal of Jesus as a Lamb in Revelation calls to mind His sacrifice. The central imagery of Heaven is the imagery of sacrifice!

The first time that John mentions the Lamb in his vision of Heaven, he sees Him as "a Lamb standing, as if slain."²⁸

In Heaven, praises are sung to the Lamb and His death is celebrated in song without sadness.²⁹ Not only is the sacrifice of Christ mentioned in song, but it is also discussed among those in Heaven. One of the elders says to John concerning the martyred tribulation saints,

These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.³⁰

Later in John's vision, he heard a loud voice saying,

Now the salvation, and the power, and the kingdom of our God and the authority of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, he who accuses them before our God day and night. And they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb... ³¹

If every mention of the sacrifice of Christ can only bring sadness, then why will we celebrate the marriage supper of the Lamb? Why will we be referred to as "the bride, the wife of the Lamb"?³² If Piper is right, it should be called "the marriage supper of the reigning King."

According to Scripture, in Heaven, the imagery and celebration of the Lamb slain is ever present. According to

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²⁴ [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u8E2UAv_3w4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u8E2UAv_3w4)
²⁷ Revelation 5:6, 8, 12, 13; 6:1, 7, 9, 16; 7:9, 10, 14, 17; 8:1; 12:11; 13:8, 11; 14:1, 4, 10; 15:3; 17:14; 19:7, 9; 21:9, 14, 22, 23, 27, 22:1, 3.
²⁸ Revelation 5:6; see also Revelation 13:8.
²⁹ Revelation 5:6-12.
³⁰ Revelation 7:14.
³¹ Revelation 12:11.
Piper, it is entirely absent.

Apparently, he was made aware of this contradiction because recently his story has changed. During one of his talks at the First Chinese Baptist Church sometime in 2008, Piper said,

You see, there are songs in Heaven about the old rugged cross and the blood of the lamb, but the songs I heard at the gates of Heaven were all glorifying God. All authentic worship is to glorify God, it is not for us. It's for Him.34

Criticism #2: Miscellaneous Theological Concerns

Extra Biblical Revelations

Piper's entire account of ninety minutes in Heaven amounts to an extra-biblical revelation. He believes that God has revealed the realities of Heaven to him just as authoritatively and reliably as He did to the Apostle John. Piper might eschew the label of “extra-biblical revelation” to describe his experience, but that is precisely what he is claiming. He is asserting that he knows truth about Heaven because he received a revelation of Heaven. Piper's account is a revelation from outside Scripture - that is extra-biblical revelation.35

Given the fact that Piper believes Heaven was personally revealed to him, it should not surprise us to discover that he also teaches that God speaks outside of Scripture through personal, private, discernible revelations to His people.36

This is most clearly seen in Piper's account of how Dick Onerecker came upon the accident scene and was prompted to pray for Piper, allegedly a dead man for ninety minutes at the time.

According to Piper,

Dick would later tell it this way: “God spoke to me and said, “You need to pray for the man in the red car.” Dick was an outstanding Baptist preacher. Praying for a dead man certainly ran counter to his theology. [Apparently, receiving direct revelations from God did not run counter to his theology?] “I can't do that,” he thought. “How can I go over there and pray? The man is dead.”

Dick stared at the officer, knowing that what he would say wouldn't make sense. Yet God spoke to him so clearly that he had no doubt about what he was to do. God had told him to pray for a dead man. As bizarre as that seemed to him, Dick also had no doubt that the Holy Spirit was prompting him to act.

He began praying for me. As he said later, “I felt compelled to pray. I didn't know who the man was or whether he was a believer. I knew only that God told me I had to pray for him.”

This sounds strange, because Dick knew I was dead.... He had no idea why he prayed as he did, except God told him to (42-43).37

Piper also claims to have heard the voice of God inside his head upon returning to church for the first time after the accident. When people applauded, Piper felt guilty about their applause and excitement. “Then God spoke to me. This was one of the few times in my life when I heard a very clear voice inside my head.” The voice informed him, “They're not applauding for you” (121).

Not only is a voice inside the head equated with divine revelation, but Piper speaks of following signs to discern God's desires. When debating whether or not to go public with his experience,38 a friend challenged him to share parts of his experience with two trusted friends. If those friends thought he was crazy or had hallucinated, then Piper should never speak of it again.

“But if they rejoice with you,” He said, “and if they urge you to tell them more, I want you to take this as a sign - a sign that God wants you to talk about those ninety minutes you spent in heaven” (127).39

I understand this is part of modern evangelical vernacular and the practice of a multitude of Christians. However, the practice of discerning the will and desires of God by signs is fraught with danger and deception. If Piper had compared his experience with Scripture, he would have been able to discern that God did not want him to share it

33 You can watch the video at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yu8E2UAv_3w4. There are no details given about the video as to the date and location, but Piper mentions at about the 51-minute mark that the year was 2008 and that he was speaking at the First Chinese Baptist Church.

34 He says this at the 42:20 time mark and following.

35 I will discuss Piper's low view of Scripture and its sufficiency later in this review.

36 I have written on this subject at length in a series of articles titled Hearing The Voice of God available at our website: kootenaichurch.org.

37 Emphasis mine. Text in brackets is also mine.

38 Piper waited 2 full years after the accident before telling people of his trip to Heaven (123). He explains this by saying "that it had been too sacred and that to try to explain it would diminish the incident. (124). He explains this delay on pages 78-79 as well.

39 Emphasis mine.
since it contradicts Scripture. Piper would have seen that experience is unreliable and no certain test of truth.

This belief in, and reliance upon, private, personal revelations is unbiblical and incompatible with a belief in the sufficiency of Scripture. It is just another of the problems with the theology that Piper presents in his book.

Miracles Confused

Piper continually uses imprecise theological language using the word “miracle” to speak of things which are not miracles at all. Piper justifies this imprecision by saying,

I refer to them as miracles - although some may call them fortunate circumstances - because I believe there are no accidents or surprises with God (55).

Just because we believe that God is sovereign and omniscient does not mean that we are free to refer to any or every detail of our lives as “miracles,” even if we can see the hand of God in them. As a minister, Piper should know better. If you call everything a miracle, then nothing is truly miraculous. Though he did experience displays of God's power, providence, grace, kindness, and reminders of God's goodness, these are not miracles.

For example, things that we might refer to as providence or explain by the natural healing processes of the human body, Piper calls “miracles.” Recovering from pneumonia, the medical staff discovering a problem with a breathing tube (61), being able to make even the smallest improvements during the healing process (71), the lifting of depression (107), and his wife and children making it through a semester of school in spite of his tragedy (143), are all referred to as “miracles.” The caring providence of God evident in the grace that He provided to make these realities happen might be noteworthy and certainly worthy of praise, but none of these fit the biblical definition of “miracle.”

On page seventy-three, Piper writes, “That's perhaps the biggest miracle: People prayed and God honored their prayers.” At best this is a gaffe! I believe it is truly a blessing and amazing that God answers prayer, but is it a miracle? No. The fact that God answers the prayers of His people is not a miracle. It is the normal way that God works on behalf of His people.

Don Piper, an ordained minister since 1985, should know what constitutes a “miracle.” Yet this type of theological imprecision and inaccuracy plagues Piper's descriptions of God's workings in the midst of his suffering and only serves to confuse the reader.

Criticism #3: Gospel Presentation

It is tremendously disappointing to read a book that purports to be about Heaven which fails to give any clear presentation of how to get there. In fact, there is no discernible gospel presentation in the pages of this book. None.

I would imagine that if I had been to Heaven and seen the glories of the life to come, I would become exponentially more passionate about the gospel, presenting the gospel, and telling everyone I could about the gospel than I am today. In fact, I would imagine that the only thing I would be able to talk about would be the gospel of God's glorious grace. Yet, somehow Piper could not find a means of working the gospel into the pages of this book - a sad fact given that four million copies have been sold.

One might have expected the gospel to take center stage given what Piper says about wanting people to go there.

Third, I want as many people as possible to go to heaven. I've always believed Christian theology that declares heaven is real and a place for God's people. Since my own experience of having been there, I've felt a stronger sense of responsibility to make the way absolutely clear. Not only do I want people to go to heaven, I now feel an urgency about helping them open their lives so they can be assured that's where they'll go when they die (129).

Ironically, gospel clarity is entirely missing. Even that statement above clouds the gospel truths. What does it mean for people to “open their lives” so they can “be assured” that they will go to Heaven? This would have been a perfect opportunity to “make the way absolutely clear.” How does someone go to Heaven? By opening their lives? Is that what the Apostles taught?

The closest thing to a gospel presentation in the whole book is on page 196 where Piper writes,

Going to heaven that January morning wasn't my

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40 Emphasis original.
41 Stated on the back cover of the book.

42 Emphasis mine. During a conversation with Dick Onerecker lamenting their lack of evangelistic zeal Piper relates Dick saying, “Yet here we are sitting in this place, surrounded by people, many of whom are probably lost and going to hell, and we won't say a word about how they can have eternal life. Something is wrong with us” (130-131). “You are absolutely right,” agreed Piper.
choice. The only choice in all of this is that one day I turned to Jesus Christ and accepted him as my Savior. Unworthy as I am, he allowed me to go to heaven, and I know the next time I go there, I'll stay.

That's the closest to a gospel presentation that Piper manages to get. That is pretty pathetic for someone who feels responsible to “make the way absolutely clear.” A sinner could not get saved from that presentation even if he wanted to!

There is no presentation of what it is that keeps people out of Heaven (sin). The reader has no idea why he would need Jesus or why he would be excluded from Heaven in the first place. Piper does not talk about sin and our violation of the law of God. He does not speak of God's judgment or the wrath to come, or the need to be born again. Piper does not explain why Jesus died on a cross, what God was doing through that atonement, or the centrality of the Resurrection. Piper does not explain that the sinner must repent and trust in the God-man Jesus Christ alone for salvation or he will face the just wrath of a holy God on Judgment Day.

Piper does say that “we are the reason Jesus Christ wept, suffered, and died on the cross” (107). That mention is not even in the context of talking about sin and the need for salvation, but in the context of recounting how his depression was lifted from him. Piper does not explain why Jesus had to die or why He died for us. In fact, nowhere in the book are we told of any connection between the death of Christ and going to Heaven.

The reader will walk away thinking that salvation comes by “accepting Christ” (196), making a decision or commitment, or opening their lives (129). That is not a gospel presentation! He has not made the way absolutely clear.

In spite of his claims that he wants to see people go to Heaven, he has failed in 205 pages to present the message of the gospel which is the power of God unto salvation (Rom. 1:16). Unfortunately, many will read his tale of Heaven without ever reading of how to go there.

**Criticism #4: Piper's View of Scripture**

I have saved this criticism for last because I believe it is the most pervasive, subtle, unrecognized, and yet destructive error contained in the book. I believe that this book undermines the readers' confidence in Scripture, encourages distrust of Scripture, and excuses and encourages unbelief in God's Word. This book elevates experience - specifically his - above God’s written revelation as a source of comfort, assurance, and hope for the believer and repeatedly suggests that Scripture can be believed because of what Piper has experienced. I understand that this is a serious charge. Please bear with me. I believe that the following analysis of Piper's teaching will bear this out.

Piper explains that it took a full two years after the accident before he felt comfortable speaking of his experience with anyone, including his wife (78, 124). He wondered, “How could I put into words that I had had the most joyful, powerful experience of my life?” He felt the experience was “too intimate, too intense to share.” It was “too sacred, too special” and wrote, “I felt that talking about my ninety minutes in heaven would defile those precious moments” (78). He writes, “At times I felt that it had been too sacred and that to try to explain it would diminish the incident” (124).

Once he finally opened up, he realized how his experience could serve as a source of hope, encouragement, assurance, and comfort to other Christians. For instance, when he finally opened up to his friend, David, he became more animated and excited the more Piper shared.

In retrospect, I believe David's exuberance was a combination of my personal confirmation of heaven's reality and his relief in knowing something good had come out of my long nightmare.43

He continues to get the same type of reaction for countless people who read his book or hear his talks. He writes,

I talk about my experience both publicly and to individuals. I'm writing about what happened because my story seems to mean so much to people for many different reasons. For example, when I speak to any large crowd, at least one person will be present who has recently lost a loved one and needs assurance of that person's destination. I feel so grateful that I can offer them peace and assurance (128-129).44

Do you notice the subtle poison in that statement? If someone needs assurance, why do they need anything more than Scripture? Why is the Bible not enough for the person who needs assurance? It should be. If God has spoken on the issue, why does He need Don Piper to

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43 Emphasis mine.
44 Emphasis mine.
Piper is convinced that because of His experience, he can offer people peace and assurance. He boldly claims, 

In fact, my experience has changed many things about the way I look at life. I've changed the way I do funerals.\(^{45}\) Now I can speak authoritatively about heaven from firsthand knowledge (129).

Could Piper not speak authoritatively about Heaven before his experience? Is the only authoritative speaking that which is firsthand? Since I have not made a trip to Heaven (nor has anyone I personally know), am I unable to offer to people peace and assurance or speak authoritatively of its reality? I have some news for Mr. Piper. Any time someone presents what the Bible says and declares the truth of God faithfully, they are speaking with authority on that subject! They don't need a trip to Heaven in order to do that. Nor do they need firsthand knowledge. What God has written is more authoritative and certain than his "firsthand knowledge."

During a speaking engagement at a Chinese Baptist Church, Piper offered an explanation for why God would allow him to see Heaven and then send him back to earth.

The question I kept asking more than any is this, "Why did you let me see that and take it away from me?" I thought that was a good question. I have a better answer now in 2008 than I had in 1989 when the big truck hit me. Here it is: So I could stand here today in the First Chinese Baptist Church and say to you without reservation, "Heaven is real."\(^{46}\)

That is a stunning tell of Piper's view of the revelation given in Scripture and the authority it carries. Would he be unable to affirm "without hesitation" that Heaven was real if he had never visited it? Is such certainly only available to those who have had an experience like Piper's? Is the revelation of Scripture insufficient to give us that type of confidence and authority on this subject?

This low view of Scripture and high view of his experience is pervasive throughout the book. Piper is convinced that "God brings people into my life who need me or need to hear my message." In a chapter titled "Touching Lives," Piper recounts one very telling episode which took place in a large church where he was invited to speak specifically about his trip to Heaven (157-158).

He writes,

A woman who sat near the front and to my left began to weep shortly after I began to speak. I could see the tears sliding down her cheeks. As soon as we closed the meeting, she rushed up to me and clasped my hand.

"My mother died last week."

"I'm so sorry for your loss -"

"No, no, you don't understand. God sent you here tonight. I needed this kind of reassurance. Not that I didn't believe - I did, but my heart has been so heavy because of the loss. I feel so much better. She is in a better place. Oh, Reverend Piper, I needed to hear that tonight."

Before I could say anything more, she hugged me and added, "God also sent me here tonight because I needed this reassurance. Not that I didn't believe and didn't know - because I'm a believer and so was she - but I needed to hear those words tonight. I needed to know about heaven from someone who had been there."

He then adds, "I've heard this kind of response hundreds of times" (157-158).

This woman did not need to hear Piper. She needed to turn to Scripture and hear the Word of God. Despite the many protests to the opposite, this woman was not believing the Bible. She claimed that she needed to hear about Heaven from someone who had been there. What about Jesus? He spoke of Heaven in John 14. He had come from Heaven and had spent far more than 90 minutes there. Not only that, Jesus didn't contradict Himself when talking about it! Is Jesus' testimony not enough? Apparently, for this woman it wasn't. Piper thinks that his words can be of encouragement to those who will not simply trust what Jesus has said.

Consider the case of Charles, a believer who lacked assurance of his salvation and was diagnosed with cancer (170-172). When Sue, Charles's wife, asked Piper to visit Charles and share his experience, Piper did. After four visits, Charles finally started to open up saying, "I'm afraid. I want to go to heaven, but I need assurance - I want to be certain that when I die, I'll go to heaven."

Piper shared some Scripture verses with Charles.

Several times I reminded him of the verses in the Bible that promise heaven as the ultimate destination for all believers.

"I know, I know," he said. "Before I was saved, I

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45 I hope that he has started presenting the gospel more clearly at funerals than he does in the book or in the few speaking engagements I have watched!

46 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u8E2UAV_3w4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u8E2UAV_3w4) (Time marker: 50:45-51:33)
knew I wouldn't go to heaven. I was going to hell. Now I want to be sure about heaven."

Stop here in this story for just a moment. Piper did the right thing in giving Him Scripture, but notice Charles's response: "Now I want to be sure about heaven." Does that sound like the response of someone who is believing what the Bible says about Heaven? Is that the response of someone who is taking God at His Word and resting in the truth revealed therein?

Piper continues: "My description of heaven encouraged him. 'Yes, yes, that's what I want,' he said."

What was the source of final encouragement and assurance for Charles? Was it Scripture? Was it Jesus' promises? Was it the Word of God? Was it John's description of Heaven in Revelation 21-22? No. It was Piper's description of Heaven!

Piper continues:
On one visit as he talked, he smiled and said, "I'm ready. I'm at peace. I finally know that I'll go to heaven."

On both of the last two visits I made, Charles said, "Tell me again. Tell me once more what heaven is like."

I told him again, even though he had already heard everything I had to say. It was as if his assurance grew each time I talked about heaven.

Charles's source of assurance was the testimony of Don Piper. Scripture was not enough for Charles. Scripture was not enough for Piper. Piper thinks that his experience is somehow able to do what Scripture cannot - give assurance of Heaven's reality. When Scripture cannot do the trick, you just call Don Piper and he can tell you with true authority from first-hand experience - not all that Bible stuff, but first-hand experience!

Lest you miss the point, Piper boldly states,
Charles's calm assurance and acceptance gave Sue peace as she worked through her own grief and loss. She told me that only weeks before his death, he'd said listening to my experience [again, not Scripture, but his experience] and seeing the positive glow in my life [not Scripture] made the difference. "It's settled," he'd said. "I know I'm going to a better place."47

This is truly sad. To a doubting man, Don Piper gave nothing more than his fallible experience in place of infallible Scripture. Rather than encouraging the man to look to Jesus and His promises, Piper encouraged his doubting of God's written Word by offering his personal experience in its place.

What should Piper have counseled? He should have kept his experience to himself and simply pointed Charles to Jesus' promises. John 5, 6, 10, and 14 would have been good places to start. Piper should have lovingly told Charles that genuine and lasting assurance of Heaven comes not from some man's experience, but from the written Word of the Living God.

One last example comes in the story of Joyce Pentecost (188-190) who died of cancer at the young age of thirty-eight. Piper spoke to her several times before she finally died. Here is one such personal moment he shared during the funeral service.

The last extended conversation I had with Joyce before she returned home from the hospital was about heaven. She never tired of hearing me describe my trip to heaven, so we 'visited' there one final time. We talked of the angels, the gate, and our loved ones...Joyce always wanted me to describe the music, and our final conversation together was no different.48

It was apparently his experience that gave her hope and prepared her for Heaven, not Scripture. Piper concludes his account of Joyce with this, "Because I was able to experience heaven, I was able to prepare her and her loved ones for it. And now I am preparing you." (190)

Piper claims that he is uniquely qualified to address these issues. He claims to be an eyewitness and thus able to speak with authority on the subject (129).

What if he had never visited Heaven? Would he be unable to prepare her and her loved ones for it? Would he be unable to prepare you? What does it say about the rest of us who have never had his experience? Are we unable to prepare people to meet God? Are we unable to speak with authority? Are we ill-equipped to offer assurance since all we have to go on is Scripture?

I believe that Piper betrays his low view of Scripture by subtly suggesting that his experience is at least on par with Scripture or even superior to it. To those who doubt, he offers his experience which he thinks is able to do what Scripture is not, namely, offer assurance, hope, and peace.

Piper is convinced that God brings people into his life who need him or need to hear his message (157). He writes, "For those who already believe, my testimony has been
reassuring; for skeptics, it’s opened them up to think more seriously about God” (158).

For those who already believe, they don’t need his testimony. It contradicts Scripture and is nothing more than one man’s alleged experience. That experience is not as reliable as God’s written Word (2 Peter 1:16-21), no matter how real he might think it is. Scripture is sufficient. Scripture is better. Scripture is written by God. Scripture is infallible. Scripture is truth. Scripture is the one who takes God at His Word and believes what God has written has no need for Piper or his experience.

Further, his experience cannot cause a skeptic to open up to God or to believe. Jesus said that those who do not believe already have the testimony of Moses and the Prophets and if they are unbelieving, “they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead” (Luke 16:31). Unbelievers are unbelieving not because they lack evidence of Heaven, but because they love darkness. Piper’s testimony cannot and will not change that. The subtle assumption behind Piper’s words is that his testimony/experience has more power to convince than that of Jesus. What Scripture cannot do, what Jesus cannot do, Piper’s testimony can. Piper thinks that his resurrection from the dead can convince the skeptic. Jesus said it can’t.

What About YOU, Doubter?

The one who doubts God’s Word does not need to be given comfort from an experience which contradicts Scripture. They need to be reproved for their unbelief! Thousands, I am sure, have read Piper’s book trying to get some glimpse into Heaven which Scripture does not afford. Many have read his book hoping to receive some final assurance that Heaven is real. Unwilling to embrace the teaching of Scripture and believe Jesus, they chase after lesser lights - fallible experiences which blatantly contradict Scripture.

That pathetically low view of Scripture and unbelief needs to be confronted and revealed for the sin that it is. If God has written it in His Word, you do not need Piper to confirm it. You do not need any to offer their testimony to it’s veracity. It is written! To the Word we appeal and we can do no better.

Why would you turn to this book? What are you hoping to glean or gain? Are you hoping to have your faith strengthened? By what, some fallible experience? Are you hoping to read something that confirms Scripture? Why? Is God’s Word not enough?

Piper’s book appeals to one type of audience - those who refuse to take God solely at His Word and rest soundly in what He has revealed in inspired Scripture. It appeals to those who are looking for something more than Scripture to give them hope, peace, assurance, and confidence that the Bible is true. This is nothing more than rank unbelief and a low view of Scripture masquerading as “faith.” As Tim Challies writes,

Faith is believing that what God says in His Word is true and without error. You dishonor God if you choose to believe what the Bible says only when you receive some kind of outside verification. You dishonor God if you need this kind of outside verification.

Readers need to make a choice. Do you believe that Heaven is real? If so, then what forms the basis for your confidence - Scripture or Piper's experience? If Scripture, then Piper's experience is completely unnecessary. Ditch the book. Don't buy it. Don't recommend it. He offers nothing of substance, only confusion and contradiction. If Jesus has spoken, then everything and anything that Don Piper offers is utterly useless. Scripture is enough! Believe it!

What About The Experience?

What should we make of this alleged experience? Piper claims that he visited Heaven for ninety minutes and was sent back here to assure the rest of us that Heaven is real. How do we explain this experience? What can account for it?

The main point of this review is not to try to explain Piper's experience. Just as he feels that his experience does not need to be defended, I feel that his experience does not need to be explained. It is only an experience and I can't exegete it. Nor do I need to be able to offer an alternative explanation for his story. We are under no obligation to believe the word of those who claim to have made trips to Heaven, nor are we even obligated to give them the benefit of the doubt.

However, I believe we can offer a few suggestions that might explain the origin of the story he tells.

1) Piper is lying. That is not a kind thing to suggest, but it is nonetheless a possibility. It is possible that Piper has fabricated this whole experience out of thin air. It is possible that Piper wrote the book for financial gain and found a way to capitalize on a horrible experience. I prefer not to believe this about him, but the fact is that we cannot discount this as

2) **A Drug-Induced Hallucination.** Piper admits in his book that immediately after the accident he was given powerful narcotics and continued to be on some of those drugs for a long period of time. The drugs coupled with the pain would be more than sufficient to explain a bizarre experience, even one as vivid and “real” as this one.

3) **A Demonic Deception.** Perhaps the experience was not drug induced but demonically inspired. Piper, though he apparently thinks very highly of himself, is not above demonic deception. I have documented enough contradictions between his experience and Scripture to show that whatever Piper experienced, wherever he visited (if he did) was not the Heaven revealed in Scripture. That leaves only one very real possibility - he experienced a very elaborate demonic deception.

Why would demons deceive someone with that type of experience? What if it would lead to pride in the individual and cause him to think of himself as someone special - someone with an experience that can do more than Scripture itself? What if the very retelling of this experience as a source of assurance would serve to confirm people in their unbelief toward God’s Word and encourage people to look elsewhere for confirmation and assurance? What if this experience would actually result in people being confused as to the gospel message by a book that does nothing to promote it or make it clear?

I think those things would serve as more than enough motivation for demons to fabricate an experience. Either Piper has been deceived (hallucination or demonically) or he is intentionally deceiving. Either way, this book is poison.

**Conclusion**

I believe Piper has been deceived, and unfortunately, that deception is embraced by well-meaning Christians. The promotion of his story encourages doubt and unbelief instead of faith and trust. It confuses people about the gospel and encourages people to look away from Scripture for proof of Heaven.

90 Minutes in Heaven presents the joys of Heaven without Jesus, worship in Heaven without the cross, and access to Heaven without the gospel.

I cannot think of one good thing which is accomplished by this book which is not immediately outweighed by its liabilities.

Christian, stay away! There is nothing here worth reading. If you want a true picture of Heaven, read the one given in Revelation and be content with it!

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50 I would also recommend Randy Alcorn’s book, *Heaven* (Tyndale House Publishers). This is not an account of a trip to Heaven, but a biblical, systematic, theological study of all that Scripture reveals about Heaven.