

# Chapter 1

## I Died and Entered Heaven

I didn't have a near-death (NDE) experience.

On January 18, 1989, I died. *Literally.*

That's important for me to establish. Many books have been published since *90 Minutes in Heaven* was released in 2004. Most of them—as far as I know—told of their near-death experiences. That doesn't invalidate what happened to them, but their heavenly encounters were different.

Often those whose earthly life is ending careen down a long tunnel with a bright light at its end. That wasn't my experience. I believe that was because my death was instantaneous.

My small Ford Escort was crossing a bridge over Lake Livingston in East Texas on a cold rainy morning on my way back to Houston to speak at our evening church service. I was traveling about forty-five miles per hour when a tractor-trailer truck entered my lane at about sixty miles an hour. The semi struck me head-on. The impact was not only ghastly, but also immediately fatal.

One moment, I saw the eighteen-wheeler coming right toward me; the next moment I was standing in heaven.

In front of me stood open a beautiful gate, which looked like the inside of an oyster, sculpted from mother-of-pearl. It was one of heaven's twelve gates of pearl. And they never close!

I felt an indescribable peace as I walked toward the gate. Unlike what often happens when we gain consciousness after surgery—a bit groggy and disoriented—I didn't have to wonder where I was. I was completely awake. *As soon as I arrived, I knew.*

But there were surprises. My first was the crowd of people who suddenly surrounded me. I like to call them my personal welcoming committee. Each person was someone who had played a significant role in my life on earth. They either helped me become a Christian or they strengthened me in my growth to keep moving forward in my faith.

Joy filled their faces as they held out their arms to me. I had known each person on earth through good and bad times, and had often seen them smile. This time, each of them grinned in such a way that I thought (at least afterward), *I've never seen any of them so completely happy.*

Their greetings were heavenly and beyond human expression. Some embraced me, others shouted greetings, and all praised God for bringing me home.

As they surged toward me, I knew without question that they were there to welcome me. I felt it in every fiber of my being. The best way I can explain it is to use the word *intuitive*: knowing without being aware of how I gained that knowledge.

I didn't touch my precious greeters, whom I had loved and lost, as we think of touch. Our embrace was between two souls. It was as if my heart held each one in a holy hug. I'd been separated from some of them by more than a quarter century. Can you imagine holding a dear loved one you hadn't embraced in twenty-five years? What a joyful reunion!

As I looked at each face, I knew all of them well. Every person called me by name. And one thing became immediately clear: My presence was no accident—at least to them. They *knew* I was coming. On earth, all of us have had some sort of accident, but there are no accidents in heaven.

After I arrived, I didn't think to ask questions, such as "How did they know?" And the answers didn't matter. Their presence felt natural. In fact, everything I saw and felt seemed perfectly ordered. I marveled at the perfection of everything—people, sights, fragrances, and sounds.

And that peaceful sense of intuitively knowing stayed with me.

No one had to remind me of what they had done for me or how they had influenced me. Our "conversations" centered on their joy to see me and my excitement at being with them once again. No thought intruded into my mind about my death, my family, or anything I'd left behind. God had simply removed anything about my earthly life.

Later, I realized it was the most focused I'd ever been in my life—and it was effortless. Nothing distracted me. I was there, in the moment that seemed to have no end.

How far away was my greeting committee? I don't know. Distance seems to have no place in heaven. I saw them, took in the joy of their presence, and felt ecstasy—a sudden, intense, and all-consuming emotion—at being there.

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Once inside heavenly territory, I didn't know if the greeting took place in four seconds or twenty minutes by earthly measurement. After my return to earth, I was told that the EMTs had declared me dead at 11:45 a.m., on the bridge. A pastor named Dick Onarecker prayed and sang a hymn in the wreckage of my car ninety minutes later at 1:15 p.m. When I speak of ninety minutes, that's conservative. Someone had to report the accident and summon the ambulance. That means my time in heaven may have been closer to two hours.

But it doesn't matter. In heaven, time doesn't exist. Everything just *is*.

After the joy-filled greetings, my welcoming committee excitedly escorted me toward one of heaven's twelve gates. I was ready to take my first step inside. I stared inside the gates of pearl, drinking in the sights before me.

That was the end of my heavenly experience.

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My writing partner, who was skeptical that I had literally died when I first told him my story, became a believer when I pointed out two significant facts. First, with the severity of my later-diagnosed injuries, had I been alive, I would have bled to death. My upper left leg had exploded in the collapsing crash of my car. Four and a half inches of my femur had been ejected from my leg on impact and traveled over the railing of the bridge into the lake below. My left arm had been nearly severed and was hanging behind me in the backseat. I had many other open wounds over my face, right leg, and torso.

Second, medical experts report that four minutes is about as long as a person can survive successfully without oxygen. After six, the person becomes what one person called a "human vegetable."

Four EMTs had already pronounced me dead. Following Texas state law, they couldn't move my body until the coroner or a justice of the peace *officially* pronounced the word and completed an investigation.

I won't go into the details, which appear in *90 Minutes in Heaven*, but I understood why I wasn't allowed to enter through the gate.

Pastor Dick Onarecker, whom I hadn't known, came on the scene of the accident. He insisted on praying for me. The police officer refused because he felt the pastor would endanger himself by climbing inside the wreckage of the car with my body.

Dick insisted, “This sounds strange, but God has told me I must pray for him.”

The man scoffed and said, “Sir, that man is dead. And he’s been dead a long time.”

“I have to pray for him. I’ve never done anything like this before, but I believe God wants me to pray for him.”

My car was covered by a tarp with my dead body trapped inside. (Later, they brought in the Jaws of Life to cut open the mangled vehicle and take me out.) Even though I was already dead, Dick, who had a medical background, checked for a pulse but couldn’t find one. He later told me that in asking God to bring me back, he prayed for what in retrospect seems strange. He prayed two distinct prayers: one, that I would have no internal injuries; and two, that there would be no brain damage.

During Dick’s prayers, my spirit returned to my body. I was alive—again. God heard and answered Dick’s prayers.

Dick checked my pulse again after he prayed. “He’s alive! He’s alive!” he shouted.

The officer didn’t believe him.

“If you won’t go over and check on him again,” Dick cried out, “I’m going to lie down right here—right in front of this ambulance! You’ll have to run over me to get me out of here.”

As Dick told me the story, he said the officer shrugged and decided to humor the pastor. He called two EMTs to come over and check me.

The first EMT found a pulse.

Not only was I alive, but there was no brain injury. And despite all the physical complications that resulted, there was no internal damage, which baffled doctors who saw the accident report.

I came back because of the prayers of that pastor. And as I learned later, the petitions of many, many believers.

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For two years I didn't tell anyone what had happened while I lay dead on the bridge—not even my wife, Eva. The experience was too intimate, too special. And until the writing of this book, the experience of meeting those specific people at the gates of heaven was too sacred to share.

I remembered everything clearly, and sometimes, in my darkest moments, the only comfort I found was remembering in detail my heavenly experience.

I didn't taste anything in heaven, but it would have been delicious. One day we'll dine at the Lord's table and eat of the fruit trees, including the tree of life. Even now we can anticipate "tasting" heaven. Heaven is a blissful buffet for the senses, and the sensory elements I experienced are why I can remember heaven so clearly to this day.

I became instantly aware of colors that I'd never seen before, hues and shades not perceptible by earth-bound eyes. Those previously unknown aromas permeated my senses. In fact, everything about heaven pervaded me.

Certain smells trigger memories from our past. For instance, one specific brand of perfume or after-shave can cause us to remember people and events. Specific flowers' fragrances remind us of our grandma's garden or a treasured vacation spot.

One of the strongest memories I have is of the faint fragrance that permeates heaven. It took me a long time to figure out how to talk about that aroma. Then I thought of a statement in Revelation 5:8, where the Lamb clearly refers to Jesus and goes on to mention those at his

throne: “Each had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, *which are the prayers of God’s people*” (emphasis mine).

It makes me smile to think that the fragrance I smelled was composed of the “prayers of the saints.” Add that to the smells of the aromatic tree of life, the fruit trees and their blossoms—all the glories of paradise—and the fragrance of heaven is a perfume you can’t forget.

Paul writes that Christ “uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere” (2 Corinthians 2:14). We are to be that lingering aroma to others through our witness, whether with words or deeds.

While we remain here on earth, we’re called to be “the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing” (2 Corinthians 2:15). When I think about those who influenced me, I can see that their witness is still a consistent, sweet-smelling inspiration—even now.

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Two years after the accident, I finally told my best friend, David Gentiles, about my heavenly journey and its incredible sensory offerings (though I left out the part about those who met me at the gates). He wept as I opened my heart to him. “You must tell others,” he said. He urged me to tell Eva and our mutual close friend, Cliff McArdle, immediately.

“You must share this experience,” Eva said after she heard my story. Later, she told me she knew something had taken place—that I had come back different, a good different—and in such a way that she couldn’t explain it. She knew that the early periods of sadness and depression after surviving the accident couldn’t have been only from the pain of recovery. After I told her, she understood that it was because I missed being in heaven.

Cliff responded much like David and Eva.

Although I was cautious about whom I told, to my joyful surprise, every person listened attentively with utter amazement. They didn't use the same words, but in essence, they said, "You don't think God would have allowed you to experience this if you were supposed to keep it a secret, do you?"

After repeated urging, slowly I became emboldened and opened up to individuals. Without exception, they echoed the words of David, Cliff, and Eva.

As word spread and when asked, I spoke in churches about what had happened. By then, I felt one reason God had brought me back was to share my experience, and let others know the delight and perfection of heaven. I wanted to shout, "You don't have to be afraid of death!"

I told my story in church after church or to any group who would listen. Audiences responded enthusiastically and wanted to hear more. The more I traveled, the more people pushed me to write a book about my experience—which I finally did: *90 Minutes in Heaven*.

One weekend shortly before *90 Minutes in Heaven* came out, I was out of town preaching at a church. While I was gone, Eva received thirty phone calls from pastors, inviting me to speak at their churches. Not once did I doubt that was God's leading.

From 2004 through 2015, I averaged speaking more than two hundred times a year all over the United States and various countries, especially in Europe.

But I hadn't yet told anyone about those who greeted me at the gates of heaven. I'm finally ready to share that sacred part of my story. The lives of each one of my greeters at the gates of heaven deeply impacted my life and faith. I long to live in such a way that I affect others' faith as I was affected. When those who've met me in turn do the same, they will influence generations yet to come. What a glorious legacy each one of us can leave!

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Heaven is a real place, and it's also a prepared place—prepared for those who follow Jesus Christ. I've dedicated my life to getting everyone I can into that perfect place because I want people to experience not only the sights, sounds, and fragrances, but the Lord Himself. He's there, waiting to welcome each one who comes to Him.