Heaven Tourism

Several weeks ago, at the end of a bible study, one of the ladies in my church recommended "90 Minutes in Heaven" to us. This isn't the sort of book or movie that interests me, but I understand the fascination that the subject holds for many people. Fascination or not, I don't think it's a good thing.

As I understand it, the premise of these stories is simple: The main character dies, or almost dies, wakes up in heaven, spends some time there, and returns to earth to tell of the wonders he has seen. I don't believe it for a minute, and I don't think anyone should.

Remember, the Christian's ultimate authority about all things is the word of God. Not personal experience. Not the words of men either, not even those who claim personal revelation or to have "visited heaven."

So what does the Bible have to say about such things? Well we can start with the words of Jesus when he was talking to Nicodemus…

> *No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. – John 3:13*

So from creation up to the beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry no one had ever died, woken up in heaven and come back to tell the tale. No one. Now that doesn't say it can't happen, but why would today be any different?

So why would we believe such a story? What would the purpose of such a tale be? Is it meant to increase our faith? Surely it's not a sign for believers, for why would we need such a thing? Is it a sign for unbelievers?

Not likely. Jesus told the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31. When the rich man died and found himself in Hades he begged for Lazarus to bring him water. When that was refused he asked that Lazarus be sent back to warn his brothers.

> *And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house— for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.' But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.' And he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.'" – Luke 16:27-31*

"If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead." If Don Piper or Colton Burpo or Mary Neal should die, visit heaven, and come back, that's not going to convince anyone that doesn't believe in Jesus' resurrection to begin with. As for the credibility of these "heavenly tourists" let's not forget that at least one of them, Alex Malarkey, later said his story was made up.

If Jesus said that no one other than he himself had ascended to heaven and that even if someone should rise from the dead that it wouldn't serve to bring sinners to repentance then why should we expect such tales to be true? Especially when we know that at least one of the tale tellers was lying?

So what does the bible have to say about people visiting heaven after Jesus' resurrection and ascension to heaven? Was anyone in the bible taken up into heaven and returned to earth? Paul wrote about at least one such person.

> *I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. 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—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows— and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses— – 2 Corinthians 12:1-5*

What does this tell us? Well first, we know that this man wasn't permitted to tell the things he heard in paradise. So who does his vision help? Was the church helped? The man couldn't speak of the things he was told. Doesn't faith come by hearing? Without someone speaking how can we hear?

Notice also that Paul isn't speaking here about that man's death, or about a near death experience. He says "whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows." Was it a vision? Was he carried up into heaven? We don't know.

I'd like to add one more thing about these tales of death (or near death experiences), visits to heaven, and returning to life on earth. The bible says that men die but once, and after that comes the judgement (Hebrews 9:27). Did God make a special exception for Don Piper, Colton Burpo, and Mary Neal? Why do that and contradict his word?

One other person in the bible was taken up into heaven and came back to tell the tale. In fact he was commanded to tell the tale. That was John the Apostle. We learn quite a bit about heaven in the book of Revelation. But even John heard some things he wasn't permitted to speak of. And through him the Lord gave us a stern warning.

> *I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book. – Revelation 22:18-19*

Our "heavenly tourists" (I am not speaking of Paul or John) claim a special, personal revelation from God of their own. I haven't read their books, so I can't say whether what they have to say about their experiences lines up with what the bible teaches or not (Others have though, and from their reviews I understand that it doesn't). But I do know that the bible says God's word is enough.

> *All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. – 2 Timothy 3:16-17*

We don't need to read or watch 90 Minutes in Heaven, Heaven is For Real, or the fictional story of Alex Malarkey to be complete and equipped for every good work. All we need for that is God's word, his Grace, and his Holy Spirit.

I won't be reading or watching these tall tales.