

A PERSONAL ACCOUNT OF A NEAR DEATH EXPERIENCE WITH A HEAVENLY VISION AND FOLLOWED UP WITH ANGELIC VISITATIONS.

By Dirk Willner

I. MY LAST DAY ALIVE.

Ask yourself this question: ‘Is this all there is to life, the universe, and everything?’ If you, like me, anticipate that there might be more to our existence than what meets the eye, then my personal account might open your eyes to greater possibilities. Life at its most basic has been summarized by three phases: you’re born, you live, and then you die. I am amazed at how many people believe that this is about all there is. For them the question I just asked you doesn’t even rate a mention. But then, is there any need for it?

The ancient biblical book of Ecclesiastes begins with a pessimistic observation: “Meaningless! Meaningless! Everything in life is meaningless.” The author, in his attempt to find a meaningful answer to the deeper questions of life, came up with the often quoted phrase: “Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you’ll die!” It’s curtains for all of us at some time, but the question that is staring us in the face at that very moment of our death, and demanding an answer from us, is the question that I just posed to you. If there is anything beyond this life then on what do we base our hope? Is it

wishful thinking, urban myths, ancient legends, or perhaps just good old warm fuzzy clichés? I have heard them all, especially at funerals. I am a Pastor and as such constantly involved in any one of the three phases of people's lives and all the stuff in between as well.

I guess one opinion is as good as another on the subject of life after death at a funeral. But how would you know which one is fact and which is fake? We often talk about a paradigm shift or perhaps an epiphany as if it is something huge in our thinking, when we finally have an insight that makes it all clear to us. Apparently, such a paradigm shift can mean the smallest of events, a tiny variation, allowing for an unexpected result. Life, in my observation, is not something we can predict or control, but the accumulation of unexpected God-moments that makes life worth living.

Mostly such unexpected moments take place in the routine of life, and when they do, everything changes; and as a result of that one event we are never quite the same again. The way we perceive reality and make our conclusions as to what matters in life become transformed. It happened to me. No indication of what was about to happen. No warning. No time to prepare; an unexpected event in the routine of life.

The calendar year was 2004. It was Thursday afternoon during the Church festival known as Holy-week; the last day of school for my children before the Easter Holidays. I had no idea that this would in fact possibly be my last day alive. At that time in my life I was ministering among a community on the Sunshine Coast in Queensland. Our Church complex is attached to a College campus. There is a lot to do every day, but the days leading up to

the Easter season are especially busy. We had numerous worship services planned and expected large numbers to attend.

I like to be well prepared and be organized before the event actually takes place. The more all the loose ends are tied up, the greater my opportunity to enjoy the festivities. Things were running smoothly. We had a team of staff and volunteers where everyone pitched in and made it happen.

One more thing had to be done on that memorable afternoon. Just as all the students rushed out of their classrooms after the sound of the last bell, I had made my way out of the office to wait for my kids, along with numerous other parents. The car-park was stacked full. We had a dentist appointment to keep for my daughter. Finally my children arrived and we got on our way, crawling out of the car-park and making our way down the College driveway. It was a gorgeous sunny afternoon. Our travel down the motorway to the next suburb was slowed by the holiday makers who come to the coast early before the actual rush – and so the trip took a bit longer than we planned for. After the appointment was over, we had to brave the traffic conditions once more.

I came up to our exit, took the turn off the motorway and approached a set of lights. The traffic came to a stop with cars banking up on the exit lanes all around us. Our car was somewhere in the middle. I listened to the five o'clock news broadcast on our radio. My kids were telling me about school stuff and their ideas for the next few days over the holiday brake. Suddenly, without warning, I was hit with massive pain around the heart and chest. Not a sharp pain, more like a massive bolder hitting my chest and digging in

deep. I keeled over the steering wheel trying to restrain the agony. I must have made a groaning sound as I clutched my chest which got the attention of my wife, Penne, sitting next to me. Even if I attempted to disguise it, Penne showed immediate concern and was asking what is going on with me. As a ‘typical male’ I shrugged it off and proceeded with the traffic through the intersection – the lights had turned green. Only a few hundred meters down the road and it occurred again while driving. I thought to myself ‘just hold it together; you’re nearly home.’ We made it into the driveway of our home. How, I do not know. Penne ran inside to phone our doctor.

Now, you have got to understand that we have a number of doctors as members in our congregation. But on this occasion, not one of them was contactable on their direct line – perhaps already on holidays, leaving the answering machine to redirect incoming calls.

Penne came back out to help me move from the car into our house. The children were surprisingly silent. Their concern was written all over their faces. Penne told me that none of our doctors were available just for the moment and that she would try again later. Every move that I made was painful; even breathing was painful. My chest seized up and the smallest movement brought about severe pain. I sat in the lounge and had another attack of pain in the chest, each moment making it almost impossible to breathe a single breath. It started to settle down. After a while I regained my composure and began to breathe relatively normal. It seemed to be over.

It wasn’t over for Penne. That evening I was supposed to conduct a special event at our church that we had set up to celebrate the Biblical setting of

Christ's last supper and to use some aspects of the original Passover meal to teach about its fulfilment. Needless to say I was not able to go. That much was obvious to Penne as well.

More phone calls were made to arrange for one of our chaplains on staff to oversee this event. All organized! Penne came back with this bit of good news. I could relax now. By now I was feeling a bit better and convinced Penne to attend this celebration with our children and let me recover at home. The Maundy Thursday dinner event expected about 80 people to attend. So when she arrived at the function venue and told a few people what was going on with me, they immediately offered to look after our children. I think it might have been Penne's intention all along to return home and take me to the hospital emergency ward, even though I had made it very clear that I wasn't intending to go there. As it was, one of the doctors connected to our congregation had just finished her rounds at the nursing home and had arrived to help set things up for this church function. Penne explained my condition to her and immediately they both came back to see me. After being examined by Dr. Sue, she informed me that I need to be urgently admitted at the hospital.

I protested and made silly remarks about being able to drive myself there if it came to that, or I tried to use the other strategy by playing down the seriousness of my condition.

I didn't want to go. I mean, I really didn't want to go. But Dr. Sue's gentle persuasion and quick action in phoning the cardiac ward at the Hospital saw the paramedics at my door in no time. I was no longer in control over anything.

The paramedics insisted that I lay on the stretcher. This embarrassed me. Arguing that I was capable of walking didn't persuade them. I was now in their hands. I had hoped that by now it would be dark enough outside to prevent the neighbours from taking a peak of what was going on at our front door. I was too young for that kind of morbid curiosity. Only a number of months had passed since I turned 40; 'I am fit and healthy, this sort of thing should not be happening to me' was the thought that ran across my mind as the ambulance flashed its lights and made haste to get me into the cardiac ward. I was admitted as a patient and placed on a hospital bed.

Immediately the nursing staff followed procedure and 'wired me up for sound.' Monitors were beeping and flashing their blinking lights. All sorts of test were done and eventually I settled in for a night of ongoing observation.

In the morning the heart specialist came to see me. He explained in detail what tests were done and elaborated on the results. Nothing! Apparently I was somewhat of a mystery to them. There was no explanation as to the pain – everything came back clear and healthy. No evidence of a heart attack or angina. No indication of anything that would concern them at all. His remarks to me were that I might have been eating something that disagreed with me, but I had nothing in my stomach except for a bite over lunch. In his assessment I was 'clear to go home' and that he would write up my release papers. I thought, 'well, I could have told them that myself. I will certainly tell that to Penne – told you so!'

The breakfast trolley arrived and I watched the Doctor from my hospital bed shuffle paperwork and consult with the nursing staff. It was the morning

shift change. Charts were passed; update chats, more greetings as staff arrived with cups of coffee in hand. I sat upright on the edge of the bed. I had eggs on toast. Brought the food tray closer and began to eat my breakfast. My bed was right opposite the nursing station in the cardiac ward. As it turned out, this was to be a great place to occupy a bed when you are about to ‘breathe your last’. A strange tingling feeling attracted my attention, first it began in my toes, then along my feet, moving up my legs very quickly. I remember thinking how weird this sensation was. But it happened too suddenly for me to even alerting the nurses to it. It rushed over my entire body and from that moment on the monitor was beeping and it was code blue. My cardiac printout was now showing a flat line. I was dead!

I have a copy of the monitor printout that showed at least in the first part the time I flat-lined. Apparently it was only for something like two minutes, according to the cardiac specialist who later on talked with me about it. He explained to me how worried they were to get me back in time before it could affect my brain and do permanent damage. When they resuscitated me, I could see on their faces that the entire staff that morning had been hard at work to revive me. It was Good Friday, 7:35am when it happened – totally unexpected and still no explanation as to what actually happened. Even after another day of further blood-tests and x-rays and the like, the closest diagnosis as to what happened to me was: ‘sick-sinus-syndrome’. In other words, or rather in my own laymen’s terms after the cardiac specialist explained it to me, the electrical system over my entire body blew a fuse and then it was ‘lights out!’

It could have all ended right there and then; that date and time could have been on my death certificate. But it was only the beginning of an incredible journey – one that we are all going to face one day, whether anticipated because of illness or suddenly like my own experience, without any indication that this might have been the last day as we know it.

As a Pastor I often have the opportunity to preach about the resurrection of Christ, especially on Easter morning. Christ's own death, according to the Biblical witness, was a means to accomplishing God's agenda in transforming our death experience into a life-giving event. Now I was about to experience it for myself. Was my faith in God going to become an experience of 'the real thing?' Perhaps you have wondered about things like: 'what's on the other side of death?' After all, there has got to be more to life than just these few years of consciousness. Is that really all there is?

II. THE MOMENT IT HAPPENED.

My first encounter with death was an experience of utter complete darkness. Remarkably, I was aware of my continuing existence. I tried in vain to look into this darkness, hoping to see something, anything. The moment from being alive to being dead, that transition, took place with surprising immediacy. I remember how quickly my mind accepted this new condition. I had actually died and it didn't frighten me. It just was. Nothing there to frighten me at first – just this overwhelming conscious awareness of a vast

black void, overwhelming emptiness; and I was somewhere in the mist of it and continued to live on.

No thought had ever crossed my mind when I was alive that could have prepared me for this and when it happened to me it seemed so natural, so inevitable – indeed so very fast: one moment in life as I knew it; the next moment experiencing the blackness of death.

An overwhelming feeling of aloneness entered my thoughts – despairingly so; as if nothing else existed in the whole universe. All interaction of material things had been stripped away. There was just ‘me.’ I was fully aware of my conscious self, yet also convicted that I moved into the realm of the dead. I had no doubt of my changed condition. I was dead and I found myself faced with the only reality that now existed. I recall an eerie sensation that went instantly to the core of my being, that this darkness somehow did conceal a presence of sorts: evil in nature, prowling around me, and it was judging me. I had a strong sense of possibly becoming its prey, it was stalking me. But there was no where to hide. But it left as quickly as it appeared. I was all alone again.

I found myself thinking that this nothingness could continue for eternity; a state of ultimate individualism –just me, myself, and I. It was a place of solitary isolation and depressing loneliness. I remember thinking to myself, ‘Well, God - now what?’

I don’t know what would have happened to me if this dark eerie presence could have taken hold of me. Would it have taken me to an experience of

hell? I don't know. What I do believe though, is that hell is the absence of everything that God is. That existence in the darkness certainly expressed that kind of view to me. I cannot imagine what torment the mind would go through if we knew that we were alive and this void was now our 'forever' existence. What would eternal life be like in a state of sensory deprivation, without our ability to relate and interact with other people? What would I be preoccupied with if there was nothing to see, nothing to do, and no one to talk to? For everything in life to be worthwhile, we need light to perceive its existence. God gave us light to see his diverse creation and to take our part in it – to interact with others in order to build ongoing relationships. We were created for relationships in the context of God's creation.

I once saw a notice-board on the front corner of a church building that stated: 'What you go after here, will be your hereafter!' Wise words when I reflect on them now.

Jesus had another way of impressing upon us the centrality and meaning of that thought. In the garden of Gethsemane, on the night before his crucifixion, his prayer was anchored to these words "not my will be done, but your will be done." I am convinced that there comes a time in every person's life when we are challenged with the issue of our destiny through the gift of choice. God leaves the commitment and focus of our free-will to us.

Apart from the wonderful gift of life itself, the other great gift given to humanity is the ability to exercise our free-will. God honours that, even if we use free-will as our means to rebel against God; against one another,

against God's creation. Mankind is capable of such divine greatness and such demonic destruction. Jesus revealed the true nature of God to us contained in the most quoted verse in the Bible: "For God so loved the world, that He gave us His one and only Son, that whosoever should believe in Him, He will receive eternal life." (Gospel of John, chapter 3, verse 16). This God, the one revealed to us through Jesus, made access to the heavenly realm a reality: through death comes the resurrection to life. Even back in the Old Testament time, Moses in his last speech to the Hebrews declared: "I place life and death before you; choose life!"

When I was there in the blackest darkness that is humanly possible to comprehend, my thought as to 'well God - what now?' made me look to the left and right of where I was. I had no idea where to go. But just in that instance, I felt the hand of God on my back. It was as if being held in God's hand and carried through this darkness. I knew that I was in God's hand; it conveyed immediate reassurance, peace, love, and hope. I had complete trust in where He was leading me. Of course I had no way of knowing where I was heading, because you need light to see any reference point to observe your travels, but I had the distinct sense of movement. I knew we were leaving this place for good and I had an overwhelming feeling of expectation and excitement.

It occurs to me now that 'walking by faith and not by sight,' as the Bible directs us to do, is to place ourself in God's hands and to trust Him throughout this life. Jesus' claim is that He has gone before us and knows the way. Not only does Christ make that as an exclusive claim, but He

pronounces that his purpose in coming was that he might enable us to receive this abundant experience of true life – in all its fullness (John 10:10).

As I drifted out of this forsaken darkness, my eyes began to see the shape of a grand mansion became visible before me. The size of it went beyond my ability to take in with one view. The closer I came towards it, the clearer I could see beyond the darkness, which by now had become more like a fading fog. I remember looking over to my shoulder and noticing that the dark fog now faded away like a mist.

The architecture of the building was elaborate. Huge windows on the outside indicated that it would have had very high ceilings inside. The place shimmered in a golden light.

Flowing out of one of the huge windows streamed a substance that looked like honey, moving in mid-air towards me. It rushed out and embraced me before I could get any closer to the mansion. Every part of my being was saturated with this glorious golden substance. It seemed to be the source of all of this golden light. I could feel every part of my body coming fully alive; I mean really alive, as if for the first time ever actually living - rather than merely existing. I was so completely covered and infused in this light which enabled me to receive the full outpouring of joy that came from the presence of God's own glory. I have never felt or experienced anything remotely like it. I was now in the presence of God's glory; rescued out of darkness and brought into His glorious light.

I don't remember how long I stayed bathed in that outpouring of joy, but the golden light now accompanied me wherever I went. I was glowing with the stuff as it ushered me closer to the front-door of this mansion. The door opened before me; it was grand and solid. Immediately my eyes were overcome by the intensity of the white brilliant light shining from the inside. Every step I took into this heavenly realm became an experience of increasing intensity.

After my eyes adjusted to this white sparkling light that radiated out, it revealed a cascade of intense colours that eventually revealed a grand hall filled with people. Everything glistened and glittered. There was a staircase at the far side of the entrance hall lined with precious jewels embedded in gold covered steps. I knew immediately that there was so much more to this place than a first glimpse could reveal.

I felt as if all these people, this large crowd enjoying themselves, casually chatting with one another, somehow anticipated my coming and gathered to greet me here in this grand hall. Sharing this part of the vision with Penne, obviously after I was resuscitated, I remarked to her as how there might be a heavenly bill-board, giving notice of who is scheduled to come up today. Maybe everyone who has had a prior connection with you in this earthly life sets some time aside to welcome you into heaven's eternal dwelling. The mood was captivating, festive and exciting. It was a place prepared for us by God himself, just as Christ had mentioned to his disciples (John 14, opening verses).

I remember looking at the people and their glowing bodies. They all radiated with that same golden colour that embraced me. They all had young appearances; as if in the prime of their life. When you think about it, this makes perfect sense, because the curse of death and decay over us has been removed. I wonder who we really are, when we will have our glorified bodies. One thing I am sure of, we will see people in a different light.

It appeared to me that all these people were genuinely ‘for real.’ In other words, no façade, or hiding behind masks – no pretence. Maybe this is what it might be to see others as God sees us. After this initial experience I thought about how important forgiveness seems to be for Jesus. To be in God’s presence requires not one spot of darkness to remain within us. We need to be fully forgiven and washed clean; something Christ accomplished for each one of us through his sacrificial death on our behalf. Now, we are enabled to live every day in that forgiveness, which means that we can extend forgiveness in order to put things right between people that you might get to see ‘up there.’

Just then, stand at heaven’s door, I was captivated by a familiar person in the crowd. All the people inside this hall were dressed in white. Various garments and a variety of attire seem to have been chosen, but all elegant and finely tailored to each individual. It appeared to me as if the clothes were somehow part and parcel of the person. As I had noticed this one particular person in the crowd, my presence was immediately transported to be by her side. On reflection, I think that person might have been my grandmother. She had the same stature and familiar smile. But I had never seen my grandmother as a young person, nor seen her in a glorious heavenly

body. There was something completely new and fresh about her. She was no longer just my old grandmother. Now she was a person connected with me somehow in a different way; as a self-contained person not connected because of family relations, but by something else.

I didn't even begin a conversation with her, just aware of her smile. Then I found myself back at the door as if my consciousness was able to extend itself and then return. I noticed that there was a person standing by the door entrance, whose presence I had completely overlooked in my fascination of the dazzling sights inside this hall. He seemed to have all the time in the world. He just allowed me to take it all in. When I noticed him, I became aware that his appearance was a bit different from all the other people. His appearance was an intense dazzling white. He welcomed me and his voice spoke right into my being. It was as if I heard him with my soul – deep in my spirit.

I didn't ask his name. I didn't even look up to see his face. It was holiness personified. It was Jesus, the anointed one of God. He held a crystal goblet filled with red wine. This goblet had a golden ring around its rim. He handed it to me as he welcomed me, but at that very instant, another such being passed by and briefly spoke to him as if in an uncomfortable hurry. Then I was addressed once again by Jesus: "It looks like you'll just be a moment before you return, so I'll leave this cup right over here waiting for you at the door (pointing to a small side table). It will be there waiting when you come back."

With those words I started to come back into an earthly awareness. Slowly I could hear the words of the nurses and doctors saying, ‘come back!’; ‘Stay with us!’; ‘Open your eyes!’ I remember coming back as if floating up from the bottom of a swimming pool. I could make out the entire layout of the ward around my bed as if seeing a single moment in a 360 degree radius view. I guess that’s what they call an out-of-body experience.

When I came back, fully conscious of my being in this physical body, I began to look at things with my normal humans eyes which now seemed to be somewhat limited and ordinary in its perception. This side of reality had such a deflated presence for me, yet I was euphoric in knowing where I had been, and happy to see my family once again to spend the rest of my days with them, but who knows for how long.

This was Good Friday morning; the day when most Christians gather in Churches around the world to celebrate Jesus’ sacrifice on behalf of a lost humanity. Salvation achieved as a rescue plan, so as to secure our eternal life. The price of sin had to be paid if we are to ‘walk through the valley of the shadow of death,’ and come out all right on the other side. I had just experienced the benefits and results of what my faith in Jesus had promised. In every way, Good Friday has become intensely personal to me like no other message on earth.

When I awoke on the hospital bed and after the stress of the code blue had subsided in the ward, suddenly all these Bible verses flooded into my mind with that now familiar voice that greeted me at heaven’s door saying: “Greater is He who is in you, than he who is in the world.” (1.John 4:4)

I was relaxing. A nurse was now constantly by my side. Everyone was recovering from the intensity of that near death event. The cardiac specialist later informed me that I was 'gone' for over 2 minutes. He said that they were very worried, because around three minutes it would have left me with possible brain damage. There was a calmness that returned to the ward with several nurses and doctors making comments like, 'you gave us all quite a scare! You are very lucky to be alive.' The equipment was removed. Charts were being filled out and checked again. More tests were now ordered to find out what went wrong.

I asked the nurse for a moment of privacy to go to the toilet, but they wouldn't let me leave the bed. The curtains were drawn and I was allowed to carry out the needed relief. I had just done my business, when once again the monitors that were still attached to me sounded the alert. I remember that they gave me a shot of adrenalin to revive the heart from dropping out on the count. Immediately the heart specialist made for arrangements to place a temporary pace-maker into my heart via the jugular. I was 'prep-ed' and wheeled off to surgery.

During this time, my family attended our Church celebration for Good Friday; unaware of what had happened to me. After the worship service concluded, Penne briefed the congregation during the announcements as far as she knew of what was going on with me from the previous night. Leaving the worship service with our three children and driving towards the hospital, a constant refrain kept repeating in her mind: 'He died, but he's OK! He died, but he's OK!' Our eldest decided to take the two boys to the hospital playground. Penne came up to the cardiac ward by herself.

She expected to see me waiting for her, bags packed, sitting ready to go home. But instead my bed was empty. Looking for a nurse for some information, she finally came across the ward nurse who informed her, ‘Well we have had some complications with him, but he’s OK. They have taken him up into surgery to put a temporary pace-maker in him. We expect him down here in a little while. You could wait for him in the visitors lounge.’

As Penne entered the lounge, there were already two of our church leaders present, and the hospital chaplain who we happen to know through other functions also happened to be there. Penne was not left alone with that news. God’s grace had even arranged for friends to be there for her.

It was an Easter weekend to remember. The real pace-maker could only be fitted when the unit could be brought up from Brisbane. The earliest was on Tuesday morning. I came back from surgery with an external pace-maker fitted through the jugular with a plastic adhesive covering over that part of my chest to prevent infections. Being wheeled back into the ward I could see Penne already waiting for me. What thoughts must have gone through her mind; all of this so suddenly and without warning. More days of waiting, talking and sitting followed over the Easter holidays. I cannot remember once mentioning how close we had come to a funeral. Then, once the doctors were back on duty, the real unit could be fitted for good ... just in case the heart would give out again.

III. ANGELS ALL AROUND ME.

It was now about seven days after my brief brush with death, or as I prefer to look at it, my moment at heavens door. The afterglow of heaven was still hovering around me. At times it was like seeing double – the physical surroundings had superimposed on it a kind of spiritual shimmer. I was recovering well and making sure not to raise my left arm as instructed, but to keep it as stable as possible to give the surgery plenty of healing time.

I would walk around the house aimlessly, privately reflecting on what had happened to me. It was hard at first even to take Penne into my confidence and tell her about what I saw in heaven. On this particular day, my in-laws were visiting to see how I was recovering. During the afternoon they felt that they could leave me for a while and drive down to the beach for a coffee at one of the many cafes. I was sitting upright in my bed, dressed; it was mid-afternoon. Once the whole family left, I spent some time in prayer, just chatting to Him about this heavenly encounter. The experience was so puzzling to me. I was confused and questioned its purpose as to why this kind of incident took place. I remember saying something like, ‘well God, I know you can switch me off and on, but what’s the point of demonstrating that to me? What did you have in mind in sharing this? I already know that you have all of life and death in your hands. I believe heaven exists!’

Suddenly, and I have to reiterate that I was wide awake, a group of five angels appeared around my bed. Each angel was standing tall and independent, but united in purpose. They looked larger than humans and

broader across the shoulders. Their stature was strong and instantly gave the appearance of a force to be reckoned with.

The angels' appearance was impressive. They seemed to be full of sparkle; every inch of their body was radiating this vibrant sparkling energy. I remember that they gave the impression of being very task-orientated; there seemed to be very little interest in chit-chat. Apparently no introductions were necessary.

The angel on my right side seemed to have had a higher rank, and I say that simply because he took the lead with this question: "What instructions have you got for us?" I could hear him as clearly as if I was having a conversation with a friend right there in the room with me. I responded with surprise: "Instructions? I don't give you instructions. If you want instructions go to God, He will give you instructions." He leaned forward and said: "Give me your hand!" I remember seeing his hand as he stretched it out toward me. I could see the same anatomy as that of a human being; my eyes examined their features – five fingers, just like us, a hand, just like us, an arm, just like us. It was fascinating. I thought to myself, 'well, I'll see where this will go,' and put my right hand into his. It was a firm handshake.

Immediately I was speaking a heavenly language. It just started to come out of me as if I had always known it. The words were articulate. There was a distinct sentence structure. But I had no way of knowing what was being said. I remember God speaking into my mind saying, 'don't worry, you know that I give this gift through my Spirit as I will. I am giving instructions to the angels through you.' As I had finished giving instructions to the first

angel, then the second one put out his hand. Again I put my own hand into his and began speaking yet another completely different language – and the same for each of the other angels. When I had finished giving them instructions as the Holy Spirit enabled me, they vanished. They just turned around and could not be seen anymore. But right there sitting at the end of my bed was a sixth angel, much less war-like and imposing in his appearance; very personable and friendly. I said to him, ‘and what can I do for you?’ He simply replied, ‘nothing, I’m here for you.’ Then he too vanished and I continued on in prayer. Now really perplexed and confused as to what I had just seen and participated in. ‘This is going to be really hard to explain,’ was a constant thought, ‘what would people think about this?’ More importantly, ‘what should I make of all this?’

As if that wasn’t enough, it actually took place a second time; the very next day, again in the afternoon at about 4pm. I could hear Penne and her parents talking and the children playing in the backyard. I was sitting upright on top of the bed-spread. I’m normally a social person, but this experience gave me a lot of reason for introspection. I must have come across to everyone extremely melancholy. My mind was caught up in constant reflection on what happened the previous day. Suddenly, to my right, there entered a group of angels into the room. They were huddled together as if tied up in a bunch. Their appearance came across as dull, like looking through parchment paper. They were shrivelled and meagre, yet coming into my room with so much anger and hate. I could feel the intensity of their rage against me. They were ropable and furious with me. I felt like they were ready to rip my guts out. I reacted quite quickly to their appearing before me like that and said, ‘look if I have said or done anything wrong you’ll have to

forgive me, I'm new to all this spiritual stuff.' I thought that my speaking in angelic languages might have caused an upset in the heavenly realm. After all, I had no idea what I said.

Straight away God spoke into my mind's hearing – an inner voice not heard through the ears, but deep within me. I knew immediately that it was God. He said, 'this is what I want you to do with these angels.' 'These angels,' I thought, 'obviously we have a different bunch of angels here – perhaps fallen ones!' Then God took me through a four part process on how to deal with these fallen angels. First He instructed me to mute them; in fact, to shut them up and stop the power of their influence. Then, He directed me to bind them; so as to prevent any further effect of their reach and stop their mobility. After that God told me to command that they are not to replace themselves; that is, to stop the ongoing demonic succession by other such powers and dominions. And then I felt far too eager and expected that I might know where this is all going, so I said 'now send them to hell?' 'No,' God replied, 'send them to Christ for judgement!' I did as I was instructed and they were gone. 'Wow! What is going on with me? What is happening to me?'

When my parents-in-law left that evening to return home, I tentatively began to tell Penne of what I had seen in heaven, and what had just been going on with the angels. My words came out, but reluctantly, weary and cautious at first, but encouraged by her acceptance and amazement I continued.

I think it was the next day, or shortly after that angelic visitation, that Penne took me for my first outing down to our favourite place on the café strip along

the beach. As I was sitting there and kept talking about these things with her, I was able to see auras surrounding some people and shadowy beings on the back of others. I remember God saying to me, ‘do you see what is going on with people, do you see it now? I don’t want you to do something about it yet, but do you see what is influencing them?’ It happened on several occasions, even in the shopping centre where I pointed it out to Penne and even identified what kind of a demonic presence was influencing particular individuals. Her remarks were often affirming that once I pointed it out, she could see the strain or stress on their faces or upon their bodies.

This didn’t continue for long, just long enough for me to get a real good insight into how our physical reality is affected by the spiritual realm. After a while, most things returned to normal for me, except for the fact that I still speak those five heavenly languages. I guess that is important for me personally to have my experience affirmed by something more than a vision, or perhaps to prevent it from being explained away as a mere chemical reaction within the brain, or that I was delusional about it all. How else would you explain this?

IV. CONVERSATIONS WITH GOD (part 1)

It was during my recovery time that I had one of the most desirable experiences that a person could hope for who believes in the gracious presence of God. No longer just wondering about God, who He might be and what He might think, but actually talking with God. This happened on three

separate occasions, and totally out of the blue. It would just take place, as if He had just thought to mention it. A bit like when a friend sends a text message on the mobile phone, that interruption is quite welcomed.

His voice was distinct from my own imagination or conscience thoughts, and as He spoke into my mind's ability to hear his words, it was clear, engaging, and ever so familiar. The immediacy of these conversations has sadly faded into the background noise of everyday life; I miss that intensely.

On the first occasion, God just simply started the conversation. "Do you know why so many people's lives are in such a mess?" It wasn't as if I was startled by the question or that it surprised me to hear His voice. What intrigued me most about this, was God's interest in our everyday lives. "I really don't know why people's lives end in such a mess," was all that I said in response. God continued: "Well, you know that I have created each person to be unique and special in my design and purpose for them?!" He began to elaborate, "but people do not base their lives on that personalized design. It's like a house plan from an architect; the blue-print sets out the proportions and puts everything into its proper place. But we just roll up the plans, place them back into the cylinder and firmly put the end caps in to lock it away. The builders come with all the required materials, the bricks and mortar, the beams and struts, its all there. The builders asks, 'what do you want us to do with it?' and all we can suggest is, 'well, see what fits and just put it together as it comes – maybe it will work out somehow.'

'No wonder then, that it looks like a pile of junk and is nothing at all like what God has in mind,' was my thought. He immediately continued, "So there is the reality of people's lives; and there is the reality of my design. Do

you know how to get closer to what I had in mind for each person?” I simply said out of a temporary moment of ignorance, ‘No, please fast track me!’ I remember thinking, this conversation is so real, relevant, and so engaging that I can sense God’s presence as He is talking with me.

“Well, it’s my Word!” God said. ‘Of course, I should have known that; the revealed Word. The Bible! So, do you want us to study more of your Word?’ was my reply and before I could finish He interjected with “No, not more study of my Word. I want people to live my Word. What is the point of studying what my Word reveals, only then to forget it and never letting it challenge you or change you? I want people to interact with my Word. I want people to live by my Word. People need to bring their lives in line with what my Word reveals. Then their life will daily, and in ever increasing ways, look more like the plans that I have set out for them from the very beginning.”

V. CONVERSATIONS WITH GOD (part 2)

Once again, the conversation was initiated by God. Days had passed. The felt nearness of God presence in that moment is something that still impresses me.

This time He began the conversation with yet another question: “Do you know how to get a grip on life? Do you know how to help people get a grip on life?” His voice was direct, even urgent, and there was no doubt that it

was God. I remember waiting just for a few seconds, taking it in and seeing if it was just my imagination. He seemed to know that I can hear Him and expected me to reply to Him. I answered: ‘How do you get grip on life? That’s a good question. A bet a lot of people would like to know that.’ My reply didn’t answer the question, but God continued: “Have a look at your hand!” I did as directed, and then He said, “take a close look. Notice your thumb. It’s not like the fingers. Its position is distinctly different and somewhat set apart from the fingers. The thumb is like the gift of the Holy Spirit. I have placed my Spirit into your life, attached yet distinct and functioning in connection with the fingers. Now look at your fingers. Four digits in a row, able to function on their own, yet designed to work together as one. Their purpose is to come underneath the thumb and in so doing; you are able to get a grip.”

God’s voice continued to speak into my mind’s ability to hear him, “In the same way there are four parts of your life that need to come underneath the Holy Spirit.” I was curious, ‘What are they?’ He responded quite surprised, “Don’t you know?” I thought I had better keep the conversation going, ‘can you tell me?’ “The four parts that need to cooperate with the work of the Holy Spirit has to do with your will, your emotions, your thoughts and your abilities. Remember: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul, with all your mind and strength. Then you will get a grip on the reality of life.” I recalled my favourite verse in the Bible from the Apostle John’s account of Jesus’ ministry and life: “I have come to give you life, and life in all its fullness.” (John 10:10)I God had something more in mind, than for us to merely to exist.

He went on to explain how submitting in just one area of our life under the Holy Spirit will not impart the full blessing that He has in store for us. He spoke about the work of the Holy Spirit in our life and his desire to perfect every part of who we are – in the exercise of the will, in the experience of our emotions, in the development of our thoughts, and in the conduct with our abilities. Every part of who God made us to be needs to cooperate with His Spirit to enable the flow of His benefits and blessings, otherwise life and the opportunities life brings us just slip through our fingers.

VI. CONVERSATIONS WITH GOD (part 3)

A few more days had passed since the last conversation with God. I was recovering pretty well by now. Normal family routine had returned to our household. School was back after the Easter break, and I had the chance to go for a few short trips around the Sunshine Coast with Penne. We usually packed a picnic bag, a favourite book to read and looked for a relaxing location with a playground nearby so that Jack could keep himself entertained for a little while. He's the one out of our three children who demonstrated the shock of what happened to his Dad most clearly. Jack came back into our bed during night sleeps and became very needy for affection from me. This need for assurance through lots of hugs has stayed with him over the past year. Even after many months had passed, Jack would still bring up the topic of Dad being in hospital when something triggered his recollection, like seeing an ambulance drive past. When playing with his matchbox cars, he would sometimes re-enact an ambulance taking Dad to

hospital to get fixed up, even though he did not actually see me being taken there by the paramedics on that night.

I am thankful that I'm still here with my family. God obviously heard and answered Penne's deepest prayers for me during that episode. But there is something else in my life now that seems to be pulling me into eternity or maybe its eternity pushing on me. It took me a long while to 'get back into this life,' and for some time it felt like I had lost the threads that bind me to my family and work. My priorities started to change. Things that would stir me up in the past or things that previously seemed to matter weren't that important somehow; those kind of things didn't have the same affect on me anymore. I viewed life from a different angle – from the perspective of having been touched by eternity. I was ready to let life just unfold in front of me and felt released from the idea of having to control what should be or how it should be played out.

Life became more of a daily surprise with God. I would wake in the morning with a simple thought of expectation, like 'What have you got in mind for me today? What would you like me to discover about your presence and purpose? How will you work out your plan in my life this very day?' A new curiosity about life developed within me.

There is a verse that began to preoccupy my mind, "for me to live is Christ and to die is gain." (Philippians 1:21) It comes from the Apostle Paul who must have had his own version of a near-death-experience upon his conversion experience. I know instinctively that God had more for me to do in this earthly life before I would see heaven again. My thoughts began to

wonder about my own experience and what I was supposed to do with it, if anything at all. I felt very alone on earth with this experience, as if I didn't belong here anymore, but I had to find my way back into this life somehow.

Penne parked the car at one of our favourite locations on a beautiful spot on the Noosa River. A playground made it perfect for Jack, and we had set ourselves up on a picnic bench. The view was peaceful, relaxing. The picnic basket had all we needed; a cup of coffee was poured and a good book came to hand. But I couldn't get into reading. My mind was preoccupied again in chatting with God. Aimless thoughts and questions and then it happened again.

Clearly, as if God was sitting next to me, I heard him speak again: "Do you know what the Ten Commandments are all about?" My thoughts became focused with a perhaps less than thought-through response: 'well, good guidelines to know what to do and what not to do in our relationships with one another and with You.' A hesitant "well, yes," was his reply, "but do you know that I have made them universal laws like gravity and even Satan has to abide by them – do you know what that is all about?" I just shook my head at this expanded idea. 'When people trespass against any one of the Commandments, they give Satan a legal foothold into their lives. The more they pursue that way of living, the greater the stronghold sin will have – they give the Devil an open door to mess with them. Satan wants to get a hold of us and his only legal entry is through the violation of the Ten Commandments.' God went on to talk about how people cannot find release by fighting against him or wishing he would now leave them alone. One sin quickly moves to another, then another. More doors are swung open to give

Satan access, and he takes hold of us to deceive, bring disease, cause death and destruction.

The conversation went on talk about the reason for Christ's coming to do away with the works of the Devil (1.John 3:8) and the connection of his sacrifice to bring about a path of restoration through forgiveness. He talked about how this would overcome both the legal right Satan has and nullifies its effect; first between God and us, and then in turn between one another. He talked about the importance of Baptism through which we are brought under a new government, so to speak – Satan has been successfully kicked out of our life! God went on to say, “Now you remember that you belong to me, so don't open the door to Satan's accusations. Keep heaven's door open above you and Satan's door close beneath you.”

God began to show me in picture-language, through what I now call 'sanctified imagination,' how we have now become the temple of His dwelling place and how this is connected to the temple-tent of the ancient Hebrews as they wandered through the desert after their exodus from slavery. He showed me how His dwelling with people was always His ultimate plan. All the things in the temple-tent were set there to bring us into a holy encounter with Him. God's journey along with us was intended to guide us into His promise, just as for the Hebrews there was a promised land waiting for them to take possession of it. We know from the Exodus account in the Old Testament that this took a lot longer than was originally planned. Here is where our willingness or wilfulness comes back into play; the one walks with God, the other walks away from Him.

I looked over to Penne as if to see if she might be hearing this as well. Penne was deeply engrossed in her book. I got her attention and started to share with her what had just happened. I was surprised that Penne accepted what I told her. Without hesitation she engaged in a conversation that didn't dismiss or ridicule that God had just been having a chat with me – right here and now.

Now that some time has passed, and more thoughts have developed around this theme, I can see why the first commandment states 'I am the Lord your God, you shall have no other gods beside me' and the one that follows it 'you shall keep the name of the Lord your God holy.' The exclusive relationship God establishes with us is compromised through the inclusion of so-called 'other gods' and a kind of unholiness grips our heart and mind – our life as we know it is no longer ours in the context of these influences.

The holiness of our relationship with the one true God is paramount to our existence. Everything comes out of this reality and goes back to it - it affects our effectiveness as God's people and gives meaning and purpose to everything we do. That is why all the other commandments, other than the third one which instructs us to 'keep the Sabbath holy as a day of worship,' have to do with our interaction and interrelationship with people. Violating the commandments only brings brokenness into those relationships, including our relationship with God. The Commandments are to keep us connected to His holy presence, experience love that flows from this, and bring it into the lives of others.

VII. RECOVERY

It was time for me to return to work after the extended recovery time. Only a few close friends knew the whole story at this time. Even though they didn't reject what I had shared with them I was reluctant to take it any further.

I admit, I was worried what other people might think – such an experience when shared has the potential for a lot of misunderstanding and adverse reactions. I didn't want my experience analysed with the various views that are popularly spoken of. My fear was directed mainly toward my own church context and those who could make life very uncomfortable for me if word got out as to what I saw and the ongoing experiences still taking place. Even though the Church around the world celebrates the Easter and Christmas events with great enthusiasm, to make a personal claim of interacting with God and angels, to hear God speak into your life and converse with angels in strange languages, to see a glimpse of heaven and come back from being physically dead, might be taking things a bit too far. I really did wonder whether there would still be a place for me as a pastor in a traditional and conservative denominational church.

But as I was to discover later on, my fears were unfounded. The first Sunday service was the only time I took up the opportunity to share with my congregation about this personal journey, and then only to speak of the vision of heaven. I talked a lot about God's timing to have me at the right place at the right time, and how he arranged and provided all that was needed to look after me. But I kept silent about the angels and the ongoing conversations with God. I wasn't ready to share that yet. I wanted to find out

how people generally took to the ‘heaven’ bit before getting any deeper. This might sound strange as you read this, but my experience of a few church people has sometimes kept me guarded against critical views, which is often disguised under a narrow spiritual view.

To my amazement the people in my congregation accepted it and generally wished me a speedy recovery to continue my work as their Pastor. The irony was that it was all about to stretch me in my life when the Pastor at the neighbouring Baptist Church extended an invitation to share this story with them also. We had talked privately and I was very affirmed by him to bring this story into the open. A school term had passed since this near death event had taken place and I accepted the invitation. A video was made and released for distribution – now it was sent around the world. The story was well and truly out there – and out of my control.

A curious thing started to arise from this message. Individual people came and share with me their own spiritual experiences, usually with the comment ‘I haven’t told this to anyone before, but you might understand.’ All sorts of wonderful experiences were kept private and personal for the same fear that had kept me from sharing it.

Now there were invitations to speak at different churches through our local Ministers Network. The word got out about this Pastor who died and came back with a vision of heaven. People wanted to know. Wherever I went for a speaking engagement, the places were usually packed out. I couldn’t believe the interest generated around such an experience. Speaking at schools to the student body on a few occasions allowed me to see the sceptics arise,

doubtful and disbelieving with questions like, ‘you must have been on drugs!’ or ‘there is no afterlife, so you’re just dreaming this stuff up?’ or ‘how do you know that this was for real and why should we believe you?’ Good question! I had no intention of making this a crusade to convince people, and still don’t, but here it was seen as a challenge to their world-view. Maybe such an experience is intended to challenge our limited and materialistic world-view, and move us out of complacency.

In such a hostile context that has no room for the spiritual reality of life it is apparent why unusual experiences like my own are kept mostly private and are rarely told. The fact that I still speak the five angelic languages has convinced me of the reality of this experience. What began to transpire through my ministry now started to get the attention and interest of others. Lives were beginning to be changed through prayer to experience release and healings – miracles were happening.

I was called in to the psych ward of the local Public Hospital, where a church member with a long and tragic personal history had ended up after depression and collapse. Our discussion explored what went on inside her mind – how she perceived her own situation. The mention of being ‘sick of this dark presence’ pressing down on her, gave me a thought. I told her about what I experienced. I mentioned that these dark angels could hear us, so with that in mind, we would give them notice to get out of her life or we would deal with them more intentionally once she was released from the ward. The psych ward is an open public place so it didn’t seem appropriate to deal with her situation directly at that time. I offered to pray for healing. She was supposed to stay in under observation for another three weeks.

Three days later she phoned me from home with the happiest voice I have ever heard her use. ‘Pastor, are you sitting down, it’s gone! When you prayed for me it was like a door opened to my darkened room inside of me and I could see the sun shine on my face for the first time. It’s great!’

That wasn’t the only occurrence. During my time back at work, I introduced the team that is responsible for the care-ministry within the congregation to the idea of conducting healings during the worship time. We announced that a special service would be held at the prayer-chapel, a room set aside ideal for just this kind of thing. There were about a dozen people who came and were prayed for.

Two people stand out for me from that event. The first was the healing of the knees from a man who had had a horrific car accident and was told that they would never really function properly for him again – he started to walk into church the next week unaided and has not needed support devices since then. The other was a woman who received healing in the tear ducts, a disease that prevented her glands from producing tears or saliva. In the morning after this prayer for healing she awoke thinking that she had a stroke. Her husband then pointed out to her that nothing of the sort was happening, but that instead she was drooling on her pillow. This woman has been able to produce saliva and cry just like a normal person ever since that moment of healing.

These healings were by no means extensive. This particular woman has Parkinson and wasn’t cured from that. The young lady in the psych ward has had to deal with many other problems related to past abuses and still deals

with chronic pain and depression. But something happened to make me wondered if there could be more.

Following these events I did some research on my own about other people who had near-death experiences. I came across a web site called NDERF.org, with a link to a 'Rev. John' who might be able to help Christians explore such a phenomenon. I established contact and we exchanged a number of e-mails. Some of that early correspondence was copied onto the web site of this research foundation and also translated into Spanish by an interested reader. From our discussion it became clear to me that I needed to see where this new awareness might lead me.

There were two cases that 'Rev. John' encouraged me to pray for. One was a young woman who had a car accident and had been in a coma for the past many weeks. The other case of a young man who had been in an altercation of some sort as a police officer and was now in the intensive care unit with about a 10% survival rate. They were in America and I was in Australia, but in prayer there really is no distance.

I began to pray for them and mentioned that as I pray in these heavenly languages that only those words uttered by the Holy Spirit would leave my lips. I began to speak in one of these angelic languages. After a while of doing this, suddenly something unexpected happened. Jesus appeared by my side with the same presence that he had at the door to heaven. As He spoke affirming my prayer request said 'well, let's go and see them!'

I was transported right into their ward, standing before their bed on both occasions. I could see everything around them, just as if I was actually there. I remember seeing the flowers and cards near the young woman's bed. I remember seeing the nurses coming in to check on them. I remember seeing the gadgets, tubes, and wires connecting them to life-support instruments. Then, standing with Jesus along side of me, I saw the angels at the woman's bed gather her mind, as if it was a broken vase, and put all the pieces carefully together. They then placed it back into the head of the woman, and she opened her eyes. She sat up and her family came in and gave her a hug and they all started to talk with each other. The young man was also attended to by angels. In his case I saw the angels move the darkness of the injuries throughout his body into a localized area, like a small little pebble. He then got up and went to the toilet, passing it from his body.

Holidays came in between, but when we started to email each other again, I found out that both were healed and going home. I was so excited for them.

I began to have confidence that my experience might actually be a blessing. So much was learned in such a small space of time and it was difficult to digest it. But now it began to share its benefits. More opportunities came my way to share this testimony. It was time to unpack this experience for others.

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