

EYEWITNESSES to HEAVEN

Eben Alexander's *Proof of Heaven* and
the Spiritual Experiences of **EMANUEL SWEDENBORG**



A STUDY GUIDE

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

The afterlife has been the subject of dreams, speculation, and countless religious texts since the dawn of human history. It's only within the past few decades, however, that the reports of people who have briefly died and then returned to life have become a separate field of study. The work of pioneers like Raymond Moody and Elisabeth Kübler-Ross brought public attention to the phenomenon of near-death experiences (NDEs), the common ground that experiencers share, and the way that these experiences can transform lives.

In 2008, Dr. Eben Alexander, a neurosurgeon who was skeptical of NDE claims, succumbed to a week-long, meningitis-induced coma that rendered his brain completely inactive—none of the parts of his brain that might have produced dreams or hallucinations was functioning. In spite of his brain's inactivity, he experienced the phenomenon of leaving his body and traveling to the afterlife—similar to what others have reported during an NDE. When he awoke, he wrote down what he had seen, and later published his story in the book *Proof of Heaven*. It created a quite a sensation, and his book spent well over a year on the *New York Times* bestseller list.

More than two hundred years before Alexander's experience, a man named Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) also

had an encounter with the afterlife. He was a Swedish nobleman who, like Alexander, spent his life studying the physical sciences (in Swedenborg's case, mining and metallurgy, although he also wrote on topics ranging from chemistry and mathematics to anatomy). Swedenborg's life was dramatically changed, not by a single NDE, but by an experience of spiritual awakening. He wrote that he had been allowed to see both heaven and hell so that he could tell people on earth what those places were like—and his descriptions bear a remarkable resemblance to modern NDEs.

This guide brings together these two men, separated by centuries but united by a life-transforming encounter with the Divine. It is designed to help individuals or groups explore near-death experiences, their own attitudes toward them, and what those experiences say about the afterlife. Each section of this four-part guide includes readings from both *Proof of Heaven* and Swedenborg's works along with questions for group discussion or individual reflection. Parallels in the two authors' experiences are highlighted in a section featuring side-by-side quotes.

Whether you're a student of NDEs, interested in ideas about the afterlife, or just plain curious, we hope that you'll find new insight and inspiration in the pages that follow.

PART ONE: HERE AND BEYOND

Throughout the ages, in many cultures, and for many individuals, near-death experiences provide a glimpse into the next life. In modern-day Western culture, stories of near-death experiences can be met with skepticism and preconceptions. As you begin this section, think about your own ideas of the afterlife. Have they changed, perhaps in response to an experience of your own? Does what Eben Alexander and Emanuel Swedenborg wrote resonate with you?

Reading

From *Proof of Heaven*: Prologue through Chapter 7

From *Heaven and Hell*: Our Revival from the Dead and Entry into Eternal Life (sections 445–52)

Questions

1. How did you become interested in near-death experiences (NDEs)?
2. What is your religious background, and how has it shaped your view of the afterlife?
3. Has your view of NDEs changed because of a personal experience? Did Alexander's description of how and why his own views changed resonate with you?
4. What does the Realm of the Earthworm's-Eye View remind you of? How did reading about it make you feel?

5. Does Alexander's description of heaven match what you imagine? Was there anything that surprised you?
6. Swedenborg tells us that angels are beautiful because they manifest divine love. Do you think that could happen on earth?
7. In *Proof of Heaven*, page 41, the angel has a three-part message for Alexander. What does the angel's message mean to you? If you had this experience, do you think she might have said something different to you?

Parallels

PROOF OF HEAVEN, P. 29

Consciousness, but consciousness without memory or identity—like a dream where you know what's going on around you, but you have no real idea of who, or what, you are. . . .

At the time, I might have called it “primordial.” But at the time it was going on, I didn't know this word. In fact, I didn't know any words at all. The words used here registered much later, when, back in the world, I was writing down my recollections. Language, emotion, logic: these were all gone, as if I had regressed back to some state of being from the very beginnings of life, as far back, perhaps, as the primitive bacteria that, unbeknownst to me, had taken over my brain and shut it down.

HEAVEN AND HELL, §39

. . . within every angel—and within every one of us here—there is a central or highest level, or a central and highest something, where the Lord's divine life flows in first and most intimately. . . .

It is this central or highest level that makes us human and distinguishes us from the lower animals, since they do not have it. This is why we, unlike animals, can be raised up by the Lord toward himself, as far as all the deeper levels of our mind and character are concerned. This is why we can believe in him, be moved by love for him, and therefore see him. It is why we can receive intelligence and wisdom, and talk rationally. It is also why we live forever.

PROOF OF HEAVEN, PP. 38–39

Brilliant, vibrant, ecstatic, stunning . . . I could heap on one adjective after another to describe what this world looked and felt like, but they'd all fall short . . .

Below me was countryside. It was green, lush, and earthlike. It was earth . . . but at the same time it wasn't. . . .

I was flying, passing over trees and fields, streams and waterfalls, and here and there, people. There were children, too, laughing and playing. The people sang and danced in circles, and sometimes I'd see a dog, running and jumping among them, as full of joy as the people were. They wore simple yet beautiful clothes, and it seemed to me that the colors of these clothes had the same kind of living warmth as the trees and the flowers that bloomed and blossomed in the countryside around them.

PROOF OF HEAVEN, P. 40

Someone was next to me: a beautiful girl with high cheekbones and deep blue eyes . . .

She looked at me with a look that, if you saw it for a few moments, would make your whole life up to that point worth living, no matter what had happened in it so far. It was not a romantic look. It was not a look of friendship. It was a look that was

TRUE CHRISTIANITY, §794

From eyewitness experience of many years now, I can pass on to you that, just as in the physical world, in the spiritual world there are landmasses, plains and valleys, mountains and hills, springs and streams; there are parks and gardens, woods and forests. There are cities there, with mansions and homes. There are also written documents and books; jobs and businesses, gold, silver, and precious stones.

To put it briefly, that world contains every single thing that exists in the physical world, although in heaven those things are immensely more perfect. The main difference, though, is that everything that comes into view in the spiritual world, such as houses, gardens, food, and so on, is created in a moment by the Lord.

HEAVEN AND HELL, §459

It does need to be known that our human form is lovelier after death to the extent that we have more deeply loved divine truths and have lived by them, since our deeper levels are opened and formed according to both our love of these truths and our life. So the deeper the affection and the more it accords with heaven, the lovelier the face. This is why the angels

somehow beyond all these . . . beyond all the different types of love we have down here on earth. It was something higher, holding all those other kinds of love within itself while at the same time being more genuine and pure than all of them.

PROOF OF HEAVEN, PP. 40–41

Without using any words, she spoke to me. The message went through me like a wind, and I instantly understood that it was true. I knew so in the same way that I knew that the world around us was real—not some fantasy, passing and insubstantial.

The message had three parts, and if I had to translate them into earthly language, I'd say they ran something like this:

“You are loved and cherished, dearly, forever.”

“You have nothing to fear.”

“There is nothing you can do wrong.”

. . . “We will show you many things here,” the girl said—again, without actually using these words but by driving their conceptual essence directly into me. “But eventually, you will go back.”

who are in the inmost heaven are the loveliest—because they are forms of heavenly love.

HEAVEN AND HELL, §§449–50

The angels who were sitting beside my head were silent, simply sharing their thoughts with mine . . . They accomplished this sharing of thoughts by looking into my face. This is actually how thoughts are shared in heaven. . . .

Angels take the greatest care to shield the awakening person from any concept that does not taste of love. Then they tell the individual that he or she is a spirit.

After spiritual angels have given us the use of light, they do everything for us as newly arrived spirits that we could ever wish in that state. They tell us—at least to the extent that we can grasp it—about the realities of the other life. . . . Angels really do love everyone. They want nothing more than to help people, to teach them, to lead them into heaven. This is their highest joy.

PART TWO: THE DIVINE AT THE CENTER

One of the most common experiences that people describe of the afterlife is a sense of interconnectedness, like a tapestry that extends throughout the entire universe with threads composed of love. Whatever words people use to describe it, everyone who sees it recognizes it as divine. This section explores that interconnectedness, and what it means to us here on earth.

Reading

From *Proof of Heaven*: Chapters 8 and 9

From *Divine Love and Wisdom*: Sections 1–39

Questions

1. Alexander describes the Core as the place where God dwells. How does his description compare to what you imagine? What was your reaction to reading about the Core?
2. Both Alexander and Swedenborg describe the joys of heaven in connection with the fundamental unity of all living things. How is that different from the way that we usually imagine joy in heaven?
3. Do you see parallels between what Alexander and Swedenborg describe and ideas from other spiritual traditions? Do you think it's possible for anyone, under the right circumstances, to have experiences like these?

4. Alexander was surprised to find that the Core had a very human element to it, and defined “human” in terms of personality, not form. Swedenborg does the same: throughout his writings, he talks about humanity in terms of having love and wisdom, of being an integrated whole that functions together with each part having its own job. How do you define humanity? Does it fit with your idea of the Divine?
5. What if love really is the center of the universe?
6. Both Alexander and Swedenborg say that evil is allowed only because it will lead to human growth. Do you accept that explanation? Why or why not?

Parallels

PROOF OF HEAVEN, PP. 45–46

A sound, huge and booming like a glorious chant, came down from above, and I wondered if the winged beings were producing it. Again thinking about it later, it occurred to me that the joy of these creatures, as they soared along, was such that they had to make this noise—that if the joy didn’t come out of them this way then they would simply not otherwise be able to contain it. The sound was palpable and almost material, like a rain that you can feel on your skin but that doesn’t get you wet.

Seeing and hearing were not separate in this place where I now was. I could hear the visual beauty of the silvery bodies of those scintillating

HEAVEN AND HELL, §413

[In heaven] there is an effect of countless pleasures and joys that unite to present a single something, a unity or united affection that contains a harmony of countless affections that do not come through to consciousness individually, only vaguely, because the consciousness is so very general. It was still possible to perceive that there were countless elements within it, so beautifully arranged as to defy description. The qualities of those countless elements flow from the very design of heaven; and this kind of design is resident in the very least affections, affections that are manifest and perceived only as a very general unity, depending on the

beings above, and I could see the surging, joyful perfection of what they sang. It seemed that you could not look at or listen to anything in this world without becoming part of it—without joining with it in some mysterious way. Again, from my present perspective, I would suggest that you couldn't look at anything in that world at all, for the word *at* itself implies a separation that did not exist there. Everything was distinct, yet everything was also a part of everything else like the rich and intermingled designs on a Persian carpet . . . or a butterfly's wing.

PROOF OF HEAVEN, P. 48

. . . the 'voice' of this Being was warm and—odd as I know this may sound—personal. It understood humans, and it possessed the qualities we possess, only in infinitely greater measure. It knew me deeply and overflowed with qualities that all my life I've always associated with human beings, and human beings alone: warmth, compassion, pathos . . . even irony and humor.

perceptive ability of the subject. In a word, there are infinite elements in a most intricate form in every general entity, and there is nothing that is not alive and does not affect everything even at the very center, since heavenly joys emanate from the very center.

I have also noticed that heavenly joy and delight seemed to be coming from my heart, spreading very subtly through all my inner fibers and from there into the gatherings of fibers with such a profound sense of pleasure that my fibers seemed to be nothing but joy and delight, and everything I perceived and felt was alive with bliss. Next to these joys, the joy of physical pleasures is like crude and irritating dust compared to a pure and gentle breeze.

DIVINE LOVE AND WISDOM, §286

Inwardly, we cannot deny that love and wisdom, mercy and forgiveness exist in God. God, as the source of what is good and true, is their essence. Since we cannot deny this, we cannot deny that God is a person, since none of these things can exist apart from a person. The person is their subject, and to separate them from their subject is to say that they do not exist.

PROOF OF HEAVEN, P. 48

Through the Orb, Om told me that there is not one universe but many—in fact, more than I could conceive—but that love lay at the center of them all.

PROOF OF HEAVEN, P. 48

Evil was present in all the other universes as well, but only in the tiniest trace amounts. Evil was necessary because without it free will was impossible, and without free will there could be no growth—no forward movement, no chance for us to become what God longed for us to be. Horrible and all-powerful as evil sometimes seemed to be in a world like ours, in the larger picture love was overwhelmingly dominant, and it would ultimately be triumphant.

DIVINE LOVE AND WISDOM, §29

No one can deny that in God we find love and wisdom together in their very essence. He loves us all out of the love that is within him, and he guides us all out of the wisdom that is within him.

Further, if you look at the created universe with an eye to its design, it is so full of wisdom from love that you might say everything taken all together is wisdom itself. There are things without measure in such a pattern, both sequential and simultaneous, that taken all together they constitute a single entity. This is the only reason they can be held together and sustained forever.

DIVINE PROVIDENCE, §97

. . . if we on the earthly level were deprived of the freedom to intend evil and to make it seem reasonable by rationalizations, that would be the end of our freedom and rationality and of our will and understanding. We could not be led away from our evils and reformed, so we could not be united with the Lord and live forever. This is why the Lord protects our freedom the way we protect the pupil of our eye. The Lord, though, is constantly using our freedom to lead us away from our evils, and to the extent that he can do so through our freedom, he uses that freedom to plant good things within us.

PART THREE: HEIGHTS AND DEPTHS

We all suffer setbacks, losses, and periods of darkness in our lives. In *Proof of Heaven*, Alexander contrasts those low times in his life with the infinite and unconditional love that he found in the afterlife. He understood, and Swedenborg also keenly felt, that it's simply not possible to be separated from the divine love that permeates the universe; that it connects and sustains us no matter how alone we feel. As you go through this section, take some time to think about how that knowledge would change your own life.

Reading

From *Proof of Heaven*: Chapters 10–19

From *Divine Love and Wisdom*: Sections 47–60

Questions

1. Looking back on his life, Alexander recalls a time of deep despair and loss of faith following a rejection by his birth parents. Have you ever had a similar experience?
2. In the Realm of the Earthworm's-Eye View, he finds that he's able to return to the Core simply by wishing to be there. Swedenborg says that this type of instantaneous transport to a person you're thinking about happens because of a similarity in inner state. Where do you think your inner state would take you?

3. Does it make sense to you that love is the essence that binds all things together? How does that change your view of the world and of the Divine?
4. Do you believe that nothing can separate us from the Divine? Why or why not?
5. Alexander describes a loss of memory—a loss of his sense of who he is—that enabled him to experience the spiritual realms much more deeply than other people who have experienced NDEs. Would you make that tradeoff?
6. Both Swedenborg and Alexander write that our thought originates from our spirit, not our brain, and that if we are separated from our physical brain, we can see more and think much more quickly. Have you had experiences like the ones Alexander describes, in which you think and respond much faster than you should have been able to? Do you think his explanation is plausible?

Parallels

PROOF OF HEAVEN, P. 70

In the worlds above, I slowly discovered, to know and be able to think of something is all one needs in order to move toward it.

HEAVEN AND HELL, §§192–94

. . . in the spiritual world one individual is present to another if only that presence is intensely desired. This is because one person sees another in thought and identifies with that individual's [inner] state. Conversely, one person moves away from another to the extent that there is any sense of reluctance; and since all reluctance comes from an opposition of affections and disagreement of thoughts, there can be many people appearing together in one place as long as they agree, but as soon as they disagree, they vanish.

PROOF OF HEAVEN, P. 71

Love is, without a doubt, the basis of everything. Not some abstract, hard-to-fathom kind of love but the day-to-day kind that everyone knows—the kind of love that we feel when we look at our spouse and our children, or even our animals. In its purest and most powerful form, this love is not jealous or selfish, but *unconditional*. This is the reality of realities, the incomprehensibly glorious truth of truths that lives and breathes at the core of everything that exists or that ever will exist, and no remotely accurate understanding of who and what we are can be achieved by anyone who does not know it, and embody it in all of their actions.

PROOF OF HEAVEN, P. 76

I understood that I was part of the Divine and that nothing—absolutely nothing—could ever take that away. The (false) suspicion that we can somehow be separated from God is the root of every form of anxiety in the universe, and the cure for it—which I received partially within the Gateway and completely within the Core—was the knowledge that nothing can tear us from God, ever.

TRUE CHRISTIANITY, §37

God is substance itself and form itself, and is therefore the first and only substance and form, whose essence is love and wisdom. All things that were made, were made by God. It follows, therefore, that it was from love by means of wisdom that God created the universe and each and every thing in it. As a result, divine love together with divine wisdom is present in every single entity that has been created. Furthermore, love is the essence that not only forms all things but also bonds and unites them to each other; therefore love is the force that holds all things in connection.

TRUE CHRISTIANITY, §56

God is in fact goodness itself. When he does something good, he is in himself. He cannot walk away from himself.

Clearly, then, his omnipotence fills, and works within, the sphere of the extension of goodness, a sphere that is infinite.

PROOF OF HEAVEN, PP. 84–85

True thought is pre-physical. This is the thinking-behind-the-thinking responsible for all the genuinely consequential choices we make in the world. A thinking that is not dependent on linear deduction, but that moves fast as lightning, making connections on different levels, bringing them together. In the face of this free, inner intelligence, our ordinary thought is hopelessly slow and fumbling. It's this thinking that catches the football in the end zone, that comes up with the inspired scientific insight or writes the inspired song. The subliminal thinking that is always there, when we really need it, but that we have all too often lost the ability both to access and to believe in. Needless to say, it's the thinking that sprang into action the evening of that skydive when Chuck's chute opened up suddenly beneath me.

HEAVEN AND HELL, §576

Anyone who thinks deeply and knows anything about the workings of the human mind can see and understand how significantly superior spirits are to other people. In a minute, we can consider and turn over and decide in our minds more than we can express in speech or writing in half an hour. This shows how much better we are when we are in the spirit and therefore when we become spirits, since it is the spirit that thinks and the body is what the spirit uses to express its thoughts in speech or writing.

This is why people who become angels after death have access to indescribable intelligence and wisdom relative to the intelligence and wisdom they had while they were living in the world. While they were living in the world, their spirits were confined in a body and by that means were in the natural world. So when the spirit did think spiritually, the thoughts flowed into natural concepts that are relatively general, crude, and hazy. This means they are not open to the countless elements characteristic of spiritual thought. They also immerse them in the thickets of the cares of the world. It is different once the spirit has been freed from the body and has arrived at its own spiritual state, which happens when it crosses from the natural world to the spiritual world that is appropriate to it.

PART FOUR: GROUNDING

When people have experiences that take them beyond the everyday world, it can be hard to shift back to a normal life and make rational sense of everything. Have you had experiences that your rational mind has trouble explaining? Is there a conflict between what you want to believe and what you can rationally accept? In this section, Alexander goes through this process. How is his experience similar or dissimilar to yours?

Reading

From *Proof of Heaven*: Chapter 20 to the end

From *Heaven and Hell*: It Is Not So Hard to Lead a Heaven-Bound Life as People Think It Is (Sections 528–35)

Questions

1. As Alexander was having his NDE, his family was trying to come to grips with his possible death. Have you been in a similar situation? Does hearing Alexander's story change your perspective on it?
2. During his recovery, Alexander distinguishes between the hallucinations of his brain returning to normal function and his vivid, coherent experience during the NDE. Does his explanation make sense to you? How would you distinguish a dream or hallucination from a genuine spiritual experience, either your own or someone else's?

3. As Alexander begins to investigate NDEs, he starts to see many parallels with other people's experiences—stories that he'd dismissed before. Have you ever had an experience that others rejected because it seemed too "out there"? Or, from the other side of the discussion, have you ever dismissed a story that couldn't be proven? If so, do you still believe you were right?
4. Alexander distinguishes between his own experience, where he had no recorded brain activity, and other NDEs, where the patient's heart had stopped but they weren't truly brain dead. Were you aware of that distinction? Does it change your perception of NDEs?
5. Alexander also describes how his investigation of the science behind NDEs led to some hard questions about the nature of consciousness. How would you answer these questions (from p. 152):
 - How does consciousness arise out of the functioning of the human brain?
 - How is it related to the behavior that it accompanies?
 - How does the perceived world relate to the real world?

Parallels

PROOF OF HEAVEN, P. 170

I know there will be people who will seek to invalidate my experience anyhow, and many who will discount it out of court, because of a refusal to believe that what I underwent could possibly be “scientific”—could possibly be anything more than a crazy, feverish dream.

But I know better. And both for the sake of those here on earth and those I met beyond this realm, I see it as my duty—both as a scientist and hence a seeker of truth, and as a doctor devoted to helping people—to make it known to as many people as I can that what I underwent is true, and real, and of stunning importance. Not just to me, but to all of us.

SECRETS OF HEAVEN, §68

I realize many will claim that no one can talk to spirits and angels as long as bodily life continues, or that I am hallucinating, or that I have circulated such stories in order to play on people’s credulity. But none of this worries me; I have seen, I have heard, I have felt.

SOURCES

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