What happened to Tim Carler is so hard to believe that he had to call his story a novel to keep from being mercilessly mocked (or locked up for his own safety). But ironically, his account rings true in a way that other “heaven tourism” books do not. Unlike those supposedly non-fiction titles, there’s nothing in this one that contradicts Scripture.

After the shock of finding his soul in the Intermediate State, the surprises multiply as Tim finds out who’s there, who’s not, and how different heaven is from our common conceptions. In a dimension not bound by time, he is sent on missions into the past where he meets some extraordinary everyday people, as well as famous ones like the Jewish Patriarchs, Adolf Hitler, and two Victorian Charlesees—Spurgeon and Dickens.

Reminiscent of *A Christmas Carol*, but with more gospel content. It’s a *Pilgrim’s Progress* where the journey takes place in the life to come rather than in this one.
The painting shown on the cover is a 1737 oil sketch by Giambattista Tiepolo for his larger painting, St. Dominic in Glory. Dominic died at 51, the same age at which Tim Carler was taken up into heaven.
“As a Tolkien scholar and theological educator, I found *Next Life* to be an interesting and refreshing melding of the fantastic and the profound. Not only does the book challenge current perceptions of the afterlife, but it encourages the reader to go back and explore what Scripture says about our eternal existence. More than that, and even differently than classic texts like *The Great Divorce*, it had me longing for eternity with my Lord.”

**Ike Reeder**, President, Birmingham Theological Seminary

“Dave Swavely’s novella, *Next Life*, is a unique take on one man’s trip to heaven. More thought-provoking than awe-inspiring, in keeping with the personality of the author’s protagonist, it causes the reader to focus on aspects of heaven they’d perhaps not considered before, rather than the external attributes that are so typical of “heaven tourism” books. Still, the protag’s visions of Nazi Germany and Victorian London—or are they reality?—add another dimension to an already intriguing story.”

**Sharon K. Souza**, award-winning author of *What We Don’t Know*
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Chapter 1

A True Trip to Heaven

I lay awake in my bed for months wishing I would die, and one night I actually did.

At least that’s what I think happened. Whether you believe that, or anything else I tell you in this book, is up to you. But remember that “truth is stranger than fiction” sometimes, or if you prefer to think of this as a made-up story, “truth is no stranger to fiction.” Either way I hope you’ll be able to get a sideways view of the truth, as C. S. Lewis called it, by hearing what I have to tell you.

I didn’t dream all this—that I can assure you. Maybe it was more of a “vision,” like those experienced by Isaiah, Ezekiel, and the apostle Paul. Although Paul, for his part, didn’t just say he saw heaven. He said he was “caught up” into it and seemed to have spent a while there, like I did. However, he did add (twice), “Whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows” (2 Cor. 12:2-3), so there was definitely some ambiguity and mystery in his mind about what had actually happened. My experience was similar to his in that way, too.

Though I was known for many years as “Pastor
Tim Carler,” I’ve never claimed to be a prophet or an apostle. In fact, I’m not even a pastor anymore. I committed some inexcusable sins, was suspected of worse and subjected to the rumor mill, and ended up in disgrace and despair—which explains the months of sleepless nights. I’ll tell you more about that later, but for now let me add that I’m also not a “charismaniac” who believes that all the miracles in the Bible are still happening to the same degree today. I even wrote a book once explaining why I think they don’t. And the experience I’m writing about here hasn’t changed my basic beliefs about any issue in Scripture (in fact it has strengthened quite a few of them).

I’ve combed the Bible and read several lengthy books about heaven by respected authors, and I don’t believe anything I tell you will contradict any clear teaching of the Word, or even most of the opinions expressed in those books. For example, Randy Alcorn’s 500-page treatise called *Heaven* is surprisingly consistent with many things I’m going to tell you, which is impressive considering the fact that he hasn’t been there yet. I recommend that book to you if you want to know more about your next life, because in the one you’re reading I’ll be focusing on some amazing adventures that were unique to me.

If you do read Alcorn, however, keep in mind that his understanding is over-literal at times, especially when he takes the visions in Revelation as actual descriptions of places and events. Those passages are more like movies that *represent* reality in a symbolic way, but are not identical to it. Along those lines, he makes a great point over and over again in the book
that there is more continuity between this life and the next than most people think, and that we can comprehend many things about it because God has revealed them in his Word. But he emphasizes the continuity and comprehension so much that the reader can miss the fact that in many ways heaven is still infinitely beyond our understanding, and even our imagination. No doubt God wants it to be that way while we remain in this world.

So I won’t be giving detailed descriptions of the places I visited, and I also won’t be crafting my narrative very carefully. I was a pastor for over twenty years, so this book may sound more like a sermon than a story sometimes—I’m just “writing what I know.” I’m basically going to tell you some of what happened in the order I remember it, and comment on it along the way. I can’t tell you all of it, for several reasons, but what I can I want to write down quickly before something else happens that might prevent me from doing so.

Before I do that, however, I want to address a few questions that might be in your mind and answer them as best I can so that there won’t be any unnecessary barriers to your enjoyment and edification.

First, why me? Why was I chosen to have such an exceptional experience? I’ve thought a lot about this. It’s certainly not because I’m an exceptional person. As a disgraced pastor who hurt a lot of people by my sins, I deserve the opposite of special privileges from God. But maybe that has something to do with why he chose me, because of many similar stories in Scripture.

Jacob saw a heavenly ladder, had a physical encounter with the pre-incarnate Jesus Christ, and became a
namesake for all God’s people, but he was a deceiver, thief, polygamist, etc. In fact, I don’t think the Bible ever records any good deeds that Jacob did, except at the end of his life when he blessed his descendants. Samson and David and Solomon and the aforementioned Paul did all kinds of great things for God, but they were idolaters and adulterers and murderers. And so on.

I used to think I was special because of my achievements, and that the more I accomplished the more special I would become. But now I wonder if I’m actually more eligible to be used by God because I blew it and nobody would think any privilege I receive is because of me. God chooses people who are obviously undeserving so they can become illustrations of his grace, to show that He’s the only one who is truly special.

Also, God may have had a sense of humor in picking me, because I always used to say, “I’ll never be a best-selling author—I don’t have a big church and I haven’t been to heaven and back.” Providence seems to have assured that I will never pastor a big church, but perhaps it will give with the one hand what it has taken away with the other.

Or maybe I was chosen because I’m a big loser and a decent writer, so I could record this amazing account but not take any credit for it.

Hopefully all this talk about my failures will mitigate any concern about me being arrogant because of my metaphysical experiences, or narcissistic in writing about them. I feel similar to Paul when he wrote about his trip to heaven in 2 Corinthians 12:7, “to keep me
from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.” I’ve also had a terrible infirmity that is related to my reputation—as Paul’s probably was, judging from the context in 2 Corinthians.

Another similarity to Paul is that I won’t be sharing a lot of the things that I learned on my trip (he “heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak”). God hasn’t allowed me to remember and record anything that would constitute new revelation about himself or his mysterious plans. Everything I share with you will either reiterate or illustrate truth that has already been revealed in the Bible. It will all be consistent with what God has already said, unlike the rest of the supposedly “non-fiction” books that have been published about visits to heaven.

“Speaking of those terrible heaven tourism books,” you might say, “going to heaven itself is not controversial—that happens all the time when believers die. But coming back afterward is harder to swallow.” Well, that’s another way I’m like Paul (notwithstanding our many differences). When he said, “whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows,” he meant that he didn’t know whether he had actually died or not, and I’m not sure either.

It wasn’t a dream like in Pilgrim’s Progress, but it could have been a series of visions, or if you prefer you could conclude that I was hallucinating because of all the devastating emotional and spiritual stress I was under. But it’s hard to imagine that an already impaired mind could conjure such vivid, detailed, and extensive
scenes from the lives of numerous persons unknown to me—not to mention the ones with famous people like the Jewish Patriarchs, Adolph Hitler, and the two Charleses (Spurgeon and Dickens).

One more matter before I revisit those places and times with you: I want to dedicate this book to my family. Usually dedications are brief blurbs on a page before the first chapter, but what I have to say won't fit there.

First, to my children: Early on after my repentance I prayed repeatedly that God would spare you from suffering any consequences for my sin, and place them all on me. Looking back now at all that has occurred, I believe that for the most part he granted my wish, which explains why I have suffered so much and why you have been so blessed. I pray now that this book will be a source of even more blessings for you.

Last, but certainly not least (especially in light of what you’re about to read), I dedicate this book to my wife Lynn. Only a person deluded by the most irrational prejudice, or perhaps clouded somehow by her husband’s faults, would not recognize that she is one of the most special and spiritually influential angels God ever placed on this planet. From the dozens of hurting people she has housed and loved in our home, to the hundreds of students she has blessed by starting and running two unique Christian schools, and the many others she has touched as a friend and pastor’s wife through the years, Lynn’s impact on this world for the kingdom of Christ is incalculable. This book is a public tribute to her, and a personal thank you for her allowing me to be a part of her extraordinary life so far, and
the exciting adventures yet to come.

For my family and for all of you, I hope the time you spend reading this book will have an effect on you in line with this famous quote by C. S. Lewis from *Mere Christianity*, part of which Lynn recently wrote on the “chalk wall” in our kitchen…

Hope is one of the Theological virtues. This means that a continual looking forward to the eternal world is not (as some modern people think) a form of escapism or wishful thinking, but one of the things a Christian is meant to do. It does not mean that we are to leave the present world as it is. If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. The Apostles themselves, who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English Evangelicals who abolished the Slave Trade, all left their mark on Earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with Heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at Heaven and you will get earth “thrown in”: aim at earth and you will get neither.
Chapter 2

Beggar at the Feast

They say that when you get to heaven you’ll be surprised by three things: who’s there, who’s not there, and most of all, that you’re there. There’s a lot of truth to that, but with a caveat on the “surprised” part. It’s true that all those things would be surprising to us while we’re in this world, because the realities of heaven don’t fit readily with our natural, earthly perspectives. But once we’re there, we won’t actually be surprised, because one of the features of heaven is that we will share God’s perspective, and he’s never surprised by anything.

Much of what I experienced when my soul left my body on that fateful night will indeed be surprising to you who are reading this, as it would have been to me if someone had told me these things. So in this chapter I’ll share the initial events (what I can remember anyway) with the thread of those surprises running through my account.

Let me start with the last surprise mentioned in saying above, which is one of the biggest...that I was there.

The possibility that I could die in my bed was not too far-fetched during those excruciating months of
suffering. At times, including that night, my body was so wracked with pain and pressure that I often thought I might have a heart attack or stroke (which actually may have been the case, though I never saw a doctor or made any other attempt to solve the mystery). And with how bad I felt, that wouldn’t have been entirely unwelcome, as long as it ended up with me out of this world and didn’t leave me here in even worse suffering.

But it was definitely a surprise to find myself, in the middle of one of my fits of desperation, suddenly transported to an entirely different realm of existence.

The supposedly “non-fiction” heaven tourism books that have been all the rage in recent years lose credibility with me from the beginning, and that’s not because they’ve been written by people with suspicious names like Burpo and Malarkey. (As if that fact wasn’t already stranger than fiction, the little boy named Malarkey who supposedly visited heaven admitted later that his story was, well, a bunch of Malarkey. I’m not sure we needed that admission—it wasn’t as if God hadn’t already given us a clue.)

I’m skeptical of most, if not all, of those other stories because they start with the person drifting out of their body, seeing and hearing things in the hospital room or wherever in the same way they saw and heard things while they were alive. And then they keep on seeing and hearing everything that way while they’re in heaven.

The problem is, disembodied souls don’t have eyes or ears!

When we die, our bodies stay on the earth, and are buried or cremated eventually. Our souls are the only
parts of us that proceed to the next life, and they don’t have any physical senses because they are not physical, but spiritual. Therefore, since the whole “floating out of your body” phenomenon is a function of earthly physics, it can only happen when you’re still alive in this world—not when you’re passing into heaven. And we know that those same kinds of things can happen entirely in your brain, of course, because people often experience them in dreams. But the transition into the next world is not a physical process, and it’s certainly not a trip through a tunnel with a light at the end—it’s more like slipping sideways into an utterly new dimension. If we perceive people or things on earth after we pass (more on that later too), it will be in an entirely different way than we did before.

So I’d be more inclined to believe those stories of people visiting heaven if they described their perception of this world as being shockingly different from the way they viewed it when they were living—and also if they didn’t go on to say things that were clearly contradictory to the Scriptures. But let’s get back to my story…

My soul was immediately without a body, and I did perceive everything in a very different way. In fact, my perception was so transformed that I will have difficulty communicating with you about it here. I’ll do my best, but I will have to use words that are too limited to fully capture the realities, and will even have to make up some terms in an attempt to discuss them. The communication that takes place between God, angels, and human souls is not in English, of course, and spiritual beings in heaven don’t have lungs, mouths,
or lips (with a few exceptions that I’ll tell you about). So I’ll record what I remember of what was “said,” but I won’t use quotation marks like in a normal account, because the communication was so different than our experience on earth, and because I can’t put the exact meaning into English words anyway. I’ll use words like “said” and “told,” but only as an accommodation to our lesser, cruder language.

I’ll also refer to myself and other humans in heaven as “souls,” and the other beings (the ones we call angels) as “spirits.” This is not a technical or biblical distinction, but one that will help you to understand my narrative, and to remember that bodilessness is the normal state of humans in heaven, prior to the return of Christ and the resurrection of our bodies.

The “Intermediate State” after death and before the final resurrection is described in 2 Corinthians 5:1-4. There Paul says, “We know that if the tent that is our earthly home [our body] is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened—not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.”

What he’s saying is that if we die before Christ returns, we will be temporarily “found naked” or “unclothed” in the sense of being souls without bodies during the Intermediate State. This is not an ideal situation for us, because we were created to be souls with bodies, so Paul adds that it would be preferable
if we could be “further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.” He is referring to the hope that Christ might return before we die, because in Greek “further clothed” can be translated “clothed on over”—there are multiple prepositional prefixes added to the verb. The hope that the “mortal may be swallowed up by life” also conveys the same idea.

The threat of being separated from our bodies is one of the reasons why death is always a negative thing in Scripture. But even though dying is far less ideal than being “changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye” when Christ returns (1 Cor. 15:51-52, a parallel passage), it is still preferable to remaining here on this cursed earth. Paul goes on to say in 2 Corinthians 5:6-8, “So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.”

That’s what I “shifted” into on that sleepless night—the Intermediate State where my soul was strangely without my body, but was also gloriously in the presence of the Lord. I will call that realm the IS from now on, because I’ll be referring to it a lot, and for another interesting reason I’ll get to a little later. But for now I want to talk about, as best I can, what it was like to be in the presence of the Lord.

That was the most profound and amazing thing about my whole experience. I can’t really put it into words, and that’s much more than a cliché in this case. But I’ll make an effort anyway.

I didn’t actually meet the risen Jesus Christ “in the
flesh” until a little while after I arrived, because I had to be given a temporary body or “sheath” in order to do that (more on that later). But as soon as I left my body, just as the passage says, my soul was immediately living in the unmitigated presence of the triune God—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. How Jesus could be bodily present in one place, but also spiritually present everywhere, is still a mystery to me. But it was obviously and unquestionably true. All three members of the Trinity were with me at all times, or rather I should say I was with them, because there was an overwhelming sense of God being everywhere. I had never felt anything even remotely like it before—not even in the times during my life that I thought I was experiencing the presence of God. Those times thinly echoed the reality of the next life, but were so different as to be almost incomparable.

God is always everywhere, but we don’t recognize or experience it fully, or even close, because of the sinfulness in ourselves and the brokenness in our fallen world.

But in the IS….Wow! *Indescribable*, like I said, but I’ll keep pressing on anyway…

So many things became much more clear than they’d ever been to me. The clarity hit me like a lightning bolt, in fact. First was my sinfulness and how undeserving I was of anything good from God. The best way I can describe it is to refer to the experiences of Isaiah and Peter in the Scriptures. When Isaiah’s vision took him into the presence of God, he said, “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips;
for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” (Isa. 6:5). And when Jesus calmed the storm and Peter realized that God himself was in the boat, “he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, ‘Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord’” (Luke 5:8). Multiply those earthly reactions by a thousand and you might have a sense of what it was like for a man like me, whose life had been so filled with sin, to find himself in the presence of a holy and wrathful God. But it was only times a thousand, rather than a million, since I was a new person now, and because of what also happened at the same time…

Before any pangs of horror and despair could gain any significant foothold in my heart, and even before I could express them like Isaiah and Peter did, another awareness simultaneously overwhelmed me—one of forgiveness, love, and purpose.

After Isaiah confessed his sinfulness, God sent an angel to touch his lips with a coal from the altar, saying, “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for” (Isa. 6:7). Then Isaiah was commissioned as a prophet, to speak God’s Word to his people (vv. 8–10). And when Peter recognized his unworthiness in the fishing boat, Jesus told him, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men.” (Luke 5:10).

Multiply the relief and joy that those men felt by a million, or rather a million millions, and you might have a sense of what it was like for me. “Grace greater than all our sin” and “where sin abounds, grace abounds even more” took on new meaning, to say the least. I knew beyond a shadow of doubt that I was forgiven totally and loved infinitely, and the unreserved
acceptance of this awesome Sovereign/Father, Savior/Brother, and Sealer/Comforter so far superseded any guilt and condemnation as to render the latter truly inconsequential. And like Isaiah and Peter, he actually had some exciting work for me to do in his service.

But speaking of the presence of God in relation to my sins, remembering it now makes me think of a comment a friend of mine made once about Psalm 103:12, which says, “As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.” My friend said that if you go north or south, you’ll eventually end up going the opposite direction again, so north and south are not infinitely apart from one another. But if you go east, you’ll never be going west, or vice versa. That’s how far God has put our sins away from us—infinitely far—and that’s about all I have to say about my own sins, in case you’ve been wondering about the ones that caused me such disgrace and despair. They’re gone, and gone forever, and now I’m moving forward to serve the Lord who redeemed me.

My experience also reminds me of the short story by Josh Harris called “The Room,” where he imagines finding a filing system full of cards containing all the sins he’s committed, but then Jesus appears and blots them all out with his blood, and sends him out forgiven, with the privilege of writing new cards. The feelings the narrator experiences in that story are something like mine on that night…times a million millions.
Chapter 3

Not Many Noble

Finding out that I was in heaven wasn’t the only surprising thing about the place, however. Another was who else was there, as the old saying goes. I wasn’t actually surprised myself by this once I was there, because my perspective was totally changed from when I was on the earth. But from an earthly, human point of view, most people would actually be shocked at the kind of people I met there. And it wasn’t just that “there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble,” like it says in 1 Corinthians 1:26. It also gave new meaning to Jesus’ saying that “I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners” (Mark 2:17).

I had the clear sense that people with impeccable reputations on earth were in the minority among the citizens of heaven. The next life is filled with people who had bad character for much or all of their lives, or who failed miserably at some point in pathetic and even scandalous ways. It seems that for the most part, only people whose lives were deeply broken in some way are able to really grasp the gospel and fully trust in Christ, which echoes the first part of the verse mentioned above: “It is not those who are healthy who
need a physician, but those who are sick.”

The most powerful illustrations of this—and that’s an understatement—were the two “tour guides” I was given on my trip. And that’s probably why God chose them for me, so I and you would be “hit over the head” with the fact that heaven is a place for the undeserving, and that because of God’s infinite grace, anyone can end up there.

Jeff and Steve had been serial killers during their lives on earth.

Yes, you heard me right, and I wouldn’t joke about something like that—though I do have joy when I think about them, because of what wonderful people they have now become by God’s redeeming grace, and how the relative footnote of their past lives stands as a profound illustration of the freeness of that grace. The terrible sins and crimes they had committed have now been washed away like tears in a flood. Those horrors are not even thought about very often in the next life, and when they are it is only for the purpose of highlighting the mercy of the Lord. (He controls everything we are able to know and think about, in a way that is always for our good.)

I call them Jeff and Steve (names are not the same in the IS, where most communication is by thought and not in English) because I think they were Jeffrey Dahmer and Stephen Morin. I say “think they were” because in the limited amount of information I was able to glean from them, their stories matched up with those notorious murderers. I didn’t meet anyone who knew them and could confirm their identity, and perhaps God limited my knowledge so that what I say
would not be a concrete revelation of anyone’s presence in heaven.

I think that may be why I didn’t meet anyone I already knew while I was there, by the way—including my father, who had professed faith in Christ just before he died. I’ll have to wait until a later time to find out for sure about him and other people I’ve known, but I can tell you that there were many, many people in heaven who were saved in the last moments of their lives. Someone had prayed for them or shared the gospel with them at some point during their lives, and God graciously gave them faith as they passed out of it, so they also could forever serve as illustrations of his sovereign mercy.

Speaking of people sharing the gospel, one reason I think that my two new friends were Jeffrey Dahmer and Stephen Morin was because of the conversion stories they shared with me. I checked later and found that it was consistent with the news accounts about the two murderers. For example, Jeff said that not long after he had repented and believed while in jail, he was killed by another inmate because he was telling too many people about Jesus. Then his killer tried to exonerate himself by claiming that Jeff was a hypocrite who hadn’t really changed. I suppose that could have happened to some other criminal in prison for multiple murders, but it sure sounds like Jeffrey Dahmer to me.

Steve told me that the police were closing in on him one day, and that he had determined to end his life in a gun battle with them. But on that same day, before they caught up with him, he visited a church building and sat in a pew half-praying and wondering if there
was any hope for someone like him. Thinking there probably wasn’t, he went back to his plan for a final murder/suicide and abducted one more woman from a supermarket parking lot. But this woman turned out to be a Christian who prayed for him and told him about Jesus, and he ended up letting her go and surrendering to the police peacefully as God’s Spirit began working in him. He fully committed to Christ while in prison, and willingly submitted to the death penalty as a fruit of his repentance. That all fits very well with the reported story of Stephen Morin.

So I’ll call them Jeff and Steve, because even if they were not those famous criminals, their presence in heaven still shows that people like Dahmer and Morin will be there.

Do you have a problem with that? I know I would have before this all happened to me—and I don’t just mean my trip to heaven, but also my own sin and disgrace. If you have a problem with the idea of serial killers being in heaven, maybe you don’t really understand the gospel of grace, or how deeply offensive your own sins are to a holy God. Maybe you have some things backward, like an article I read by an atheist who accused Christianity of being fundamentally flawed because repentant murderers like Dahmer and Morin might be in heaven while at least some of their innocent victims are not. Rather than invalidating the gospel message, however, that possibility actually demonstrates the essence of it. The truth of justification by faith alone means that in heaven it will be very clear “that no one can boast” (Eph. 2:8-9), a fact which couldn’t have been more obvious to me while I was there.
What about *who was not there*? The old saying suggests that we’ll be surprised by that as well, and I can confirm that part too. As I already implied, there are far fewer “religious” people in heaven than we would ever imagine. We tend to think of the citizenry being primarily “good people,” with the occasional bad seed like the thief on the cross thrown in for good measure. But there is no one in heaven who was truly good in God’s eyes during their life on earth (or even “innocent,” as the atheist writer described the serial killers’ victims). Every one of us is a sinner by birth and by choice, having proceeded from Adam and inherited both his condemnation and his sinful nature.

This is something else that becomes so clear in the presence of God: our entire race was spiritually separated from him when we fell into sin in the Garden of Eden, just like the angels who fell from heaven when Lucifer led a rebellion against the Creator. And just as there was never any way that the fallen angels could be restored to fellowship with God, so we as fallen humans became equally opposed to him in our nature and undeserving of anything good. Our only hope, therefore, lies in the redemption of Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God who became a human being to remove the barrier of sin between God and us by his sacrifice on the cross, and in the transformation of our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

Remember Jesus himself said “I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.” He is “our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are
zealous for good works” (Titus 2:13). The last part of that verse shows that people do change for good as a result of being redeemed by Christ, but they don’t get redeemed because they made a change for good. And in many cases, like the thief on the cross, they don’t repent until the very end of their lives, and that change might not be seen by many others—or even any others. Remember that we only know about the conversion of the thief on the cross because Luke recorded the episode in his gospel. If he hadn’t, only Jesus (and maybe a few onlookers) would have known about it.

Though I didn’t meet a large number of other souls on my trip, I can tell you with confidence from what I did experience (and from the Scriptures) that there is no one in heaven who did anything to deserve being there. And there are a staggering number of souls who were never known by others to be believers. Many of them were saved while passing out of this life, but others just never looked much like Christians during their lives. But they were disciplined by God, sometimes to the point of death itself (1 Cor. 11:30-32), and they were broken enough by their sin to know that Christ was their only hope, like the tax collector who had nothing to offer but simply prayed, “God, be merciful to me the sinner.”

“I tell you,” Jesus said, “this man went to his house justified rather than the other.” “The other” was not just a very religious and moral person, but a Pharisee who was a leader in the church (Luke 18:9-14). There are not any people like that man in heaven, because such people trust in who they are (“I thank God that I am not as bad as this tax collector”) and what they do (“I
fast and give money to the church”) to make them right with God, instead of trusting in Jesus and what he has done for us.

I was surprised to find out that I was in heaven, and many religious people will be shocked to find out they’re not (Matt. 7:21-23). Don’t get me wrong—if you are a true Christian, the loved ones that you’ve had spiritual fellowship with in this life will be there, as 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 promises. But you will be surprised by the absence of many who you knew as mere acquaintances, or as public figures, who seemed like good people from an outward perspective.