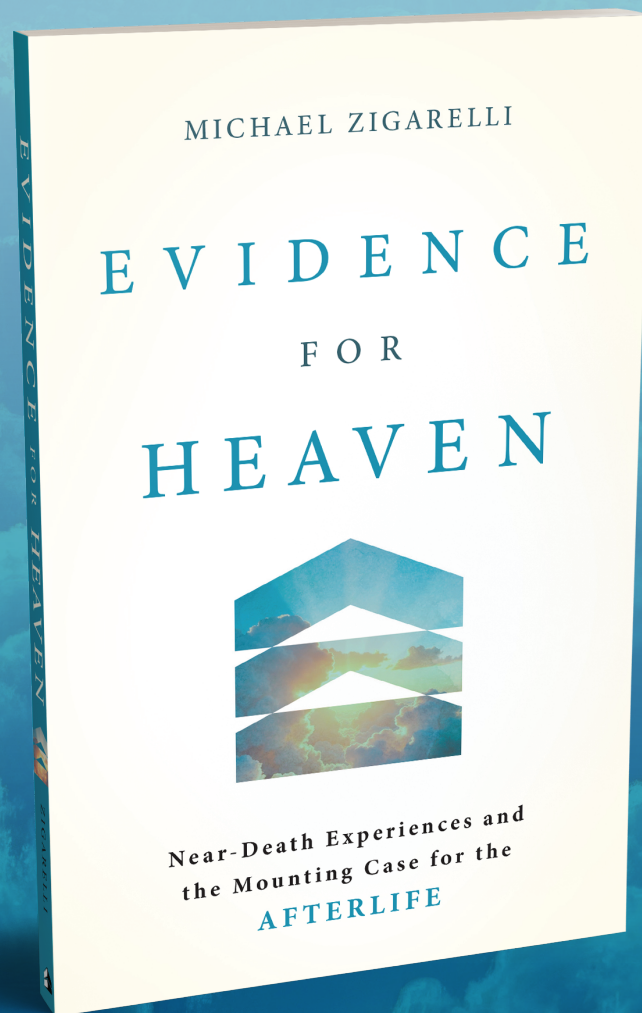


DISCUSSION GUIDE

*Evidence for Heaven: Near-Death Experiences
and the Mounting Case for the Afterlife*

Michael Zigarelli



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Welcome, friend!

Thanks for digging deeper into this mystery with me. *Evidence for Heaven* explores the abundant eyewitness testimony for an afterlife—the historic evidence, the similar reports, the bizarre out-of-body claims that were later verified, the transformation of those who returned. But there’s so much more to consider, isn’t there?

For one thing, there’s *your perspective* about whether there’s really a case for the afterlife. And there’s the perspective of those around you, from your closest friends to your closest neighbors, from your immediate family to your extended family, from your Sunday school to your school dormitory. We often learn the most when we learn alongside smart people.

That’s why we created this discussion guide. It allows us to continue the conversation—to lean into the tough questions—rather than simply closing the book and moving on to the next thing. You know it and I know it: The best “next thing” we can do after reading something important is to reflect on it. Deeply. Ideally with others.

Here’s another observation from thirty years in the college classroom: *Discussions tend to be no better than the preparation of the participants*. It’s more educational for everyone—and a whole lot more interesting—if people show up having contemplated the reading and the discussion questions. Bring your best, bring your curiosity, bring your skepticism, but most of all, bring a willingness to share your insights. They’re valuable! Plus, the more you contribute, the more you’ll learn—and the more everyone else will learn too.

Remember what’s at stake here. We’re wrestling with one of the greatest questions in human history. In fact, our answer to *What happens after we die?* may reveal clues to other great questions of existence, like *Where did we come from?* and *How should we live?*

Tell me, are there any questions more imperative than those?

Personally, I don’t think so. That’s why I’m so committed to pursuing them. If you are too, I’d love to hear from you. Connect with me through my website, MichaelZigarelli.com.

Onward and upward!

Mike

Session 1

Introduction: “The Mounting Case for the Afterlife”

Choose a Warm-Up Question

1. What questions, doubts, or hopes do you bring to this study?
What would you like to learn from it?
2. What, if anything, is in your way of believing in life after death?
What is in the way for your family and friends?
3. Before opening this book, what was your perspective on near-death experiences?
Have you considered them to be real events, medical phenomena, or something else?

Choose from Among These Discussion Questions (or Create Your Own)

1. The chapter says, “We can hope for life after death. And we can pray. But can we *know*?” (p. 16). What do you think?
2. What kind of evidence (scientific, experiential, biblical, etc.) leads you to conclude that something is “proven”? Applying that, what would be *confirming* or *disconfirming* evidence of an afterlife?
3. The author claims that the case for the afterlife is “now a case that’s data-driven—*evidence-based*—no longer solely dependent on sacred writings or human tradition” (p. 15). What do you think of this approach to exploring spiritual truths?
4. Does the extraordinary number of NDE testimonies (pp. 15–16) create a meaningful case for their credibility?
5. The chapter presents an overview of “the seven lines of evidence” for life after death (pp. 15–22). Which ones seem to be most and least compelling to you so far, and why?
6. If even some near-death experiences are recollections of actual events (i.e., not dreams, hallucinations, etc.), so what? What are the implications if they’re real?
7. What other aspects of this chapter would you like to discuss?

Session 2

Chapters 1 & 2: “The Evidence from History” and “The Evidence from Consistent Testimony”

Choose a Warm-Up Question

1. Why is it important to study history? How can looking at the past inform the present? Consider, for example, the hundreds of times the Bible invites people to “remember.”
2. How important is it that eyewitnesses to an event agree in their testimony? For eyewitnesses to be credible, how consistent must their testimonies be? Do you have an example?
3. Where in the Bible do we see heavy reliance on eyewitness testimony and multiple witnesses?

Choose from Among These Discussion Questions (or Create Your Own)

1. Consider the painting “Ascent of the Blessed” on page 26. How significant is this artwork in the case for the afterlife? Is it in any way *evidence* of a supernatural realm?
2. What do you think of the objection in chapter 1 that people just see what they expect to see in these experiences, so NDEs are mere reflections of a person’s cultural conditioning (pp. 31–33)? How does the chapter address this “expectation” objection?
3. The widely reported account from Dr. Mary Neal (pp. 35–36) is regarded as highly credible, especially by those who watch the brief TED Talk version of her account (the link is in the chap. 2 endnotes). What do you think about her claims?
4. Look over the twelve elements consistently reported in modern NDEs (p. 37). How many of these have you heard of before? Do similarities across NDE testimonies support the existence of a supernatural realm?
5. If people worldwide describe similar NDEs (p. 38), what explanations—natural or supernatural—make sense to you? How might you respond to a skeptic who says, “Cross-cultural overlap only shows there’s universal brain response”?
6. The author calculates the probability of consistent elements appearing in NDEs if they’re not real events. Comment on his conclusion that as a result, “it’s probably irrational to attribute NDEs to dreams, hallucinations, or drug reactions” (p. 41).
7. What other aspects of chapters 1 and 2 would you like to discuss?

Session 3

Chapters 3 & 4: “The Evidence from Corroborated Testimony” and “The Evidence from Children and the Blind”

Choose a Warm-Up Question

1. Have you experienced something that seemed beyond coincidence or explanation? Has anyone ever shared such a story with you?
2. Did you ever hear a story from a child that seemed believable *because* it came from a child?
3. How essential is the “corroborating” evidence that attests to Jesus’s ministry (e.g., evidence about the existence of Jesus, his reputation as a miracle worker, the crucifixion, the empty tomb, the resurrection, etc.)? If you’re not familiar with this evidence, do a quick search for it and then comment on how much the corroboration matters.

Choose from Among These Discussion Questions (or Create Your Own)

1. Chapter 3 presents several “corroborated” or “veridical” NDE cases (i.e., cases where the facts were verified by others). Did any of the accounts make you pause and think, *This might actually be describing something real?*
2. Chapter 3 also organizes the corroborated cases into three categories: accurate reports about (1) events near the body, (2) events away from the body, and (3) deceased persons. How convincing do you find each category of evidence?
3. In these corroborated cases, what details would be hard to explain if, as skeptics claim, NDEs only occur in the brain?
4. What do you think of the children’s accounts of the afterlife in chapter 4? Which, if any, offers the best evidence that the child giving the account experienced something real rather than imaginary?
5. Comment on the finding that children and the blind consistently report the elements of a typical NDE (pp. 57–59).
6. The author says that the evidence from chapters 1 and 2 yields only a suggestive (“prima facie”) case that NDEs and the afterlife are real (pp. 44–45). Do you agree? How much stronger does the case become in chapters 3 and 4 when we see NDEs with independent verification of the claims?
7. What other aspects of chapters 3 and 4 would you like to discuss?

Session 4

Chapters 5 & 6: “The Evidence from Deathbed Witnesses” and “The Evidence from Expert Witnesses”

Choose a Warm-Up Question

1. Have you ever witnessed or heard about a “deathbed vision”? How common do you think these end-of-life experiences are?
2. Should Christian theology incorporate the conclusions of physicians and researchers or maintain a rigid separation between spiritual truth and scientific observation?
3. We’ve completed half the study so far. To explore the topics most effectively, would you recommend any adjustments to the discussions for the second half?

Choose from Among These Discussion Questions (or Create Your Own)

1. Reports of these “deathbed visions” seem to be everywhere, transcending geography and generations. What makes certain end-of-life accounts believable—or questionable?
2. How, if at all, does the deathbed vision evidence enrich the case for an afterlife? What’s different about these experiences from NDEs?
3. Skeptics are insistent that despite worldwide prevalence, “deathbed visions are a function of oxygen deprivation, high fever, pain medication, or a lifetime of cultural conditioning to believe in an afterlife, any of which can culminate in these fanciful hallucinations” (p. 69). How does the chapter respond to this “hallucination” hypothesis, and what do you think?
4. Consider the various “expert witnesses” highlighted in chapter 6. Which of these experts were most persuasive to you, and why?
5. Comment on the scientific evidence that NDEs are natural phenomena (pp. 77–79) and the counterclaim that these researchers are advancing not scientific conclusions but instead a secular ideology (pp. 79–82). Which argument seems to have more merit?
6. Are there any takeaways from these chapters that strengthen your hope for an afterlife?
7. What other aspects of chapters 5 and 6 would you like to discuss?

Session 5

Chapters 7 & 8: “The Evidence from Transformed Lives” and “The Afterlife Verdict, the Present Life Vision”

Choose a Warm-Up Question

1. If someday God asks you, “What have you done with the life I’ve given you?” (p. 103), what would you like your answer to be?
2. How does the possibility of an afterlife reshape your understanding of what matters most? How might that affect your daily life?
3. How have you seen belief about the afterlife affect the grieving process? Might the hope that’s implied in this book assist in some way?

Choose from Among These Discussion Questions (or Create Your Own)

1. Chapter 7 shared several stories of profound transformation after an NDE. Did any of the stories make you think, *If that’s true, that’s significant?*
2. But what, if anything, do these stories (or the research, like in *The Lancet*) add to the case for an afterlife? Just how much do “transformed lives” support the authenticity of NDEs and an afterlife?
3. Review the twelve questions on pages 100–101 that summarize the case for the afterlife. How compelling do you find this “closing argument” to be? Can skeptics overcome this cumulative case, especially when “all it takes is one white crow” to show that NDEs and the afterlife are real?
4. The author says that “NDEs may ultimately signal the coming end of atheism. Possibly agnosticism as well” (p. 102). Comment on whether that might be true. Closer to home, might it be true for the atheists and agnostics in your life?
5. Consider the potential “meaning of life” implications of NDEs (pp. 102–5), especially the emerging conclusion that “it may be *the expressions of love* that matter most in life” (p. 103). Is this consistent with a biblical understanding of why we’re here?
6. Chapter 8 culminates in this question: “Based on your impartial consideration of the evidence, what is your verdict? What happens after we die?” (p. 106). What’s your answer to that question, and to what extent does the NDE evidence influence your confidence?
7. What other aspects of chapters 7 and 8 would you like to discuss?

Session 6

“Concise Answers to Common Questions”

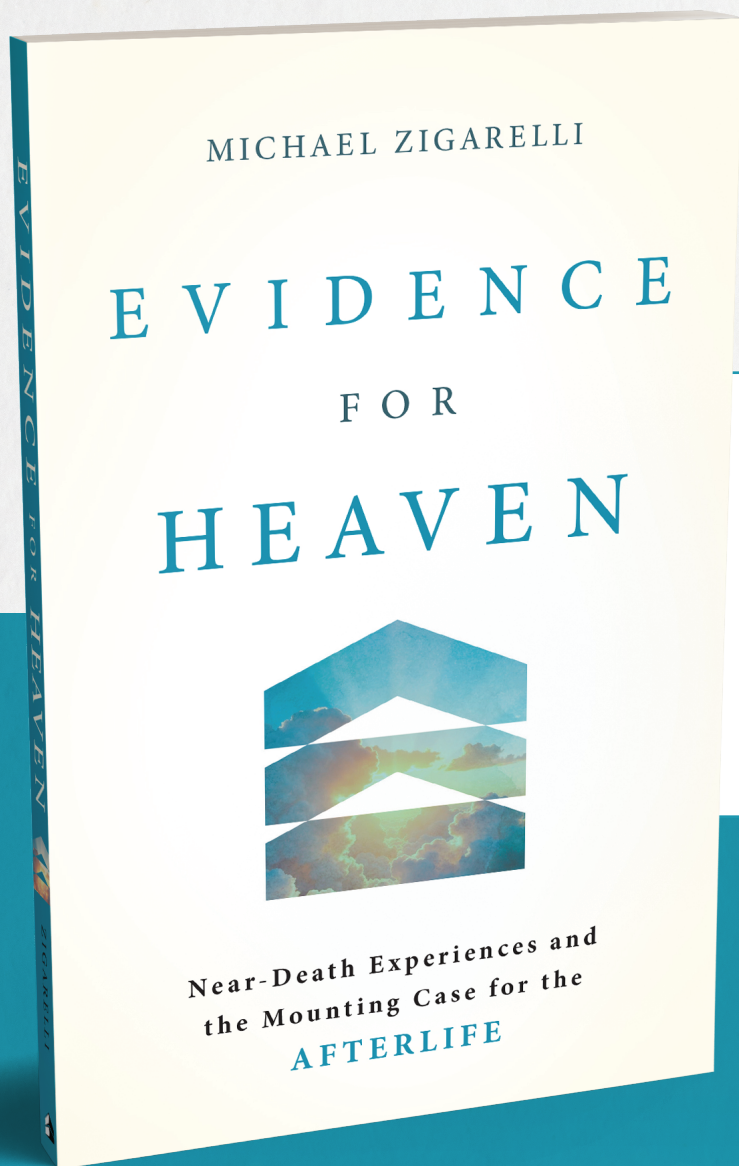
Choose a Warm-Up Question

1. In light of this study, how has your understanding of the afterlife deepened? Has your confidence in life after death shifted in any way?
2. How do you normally approach mysteries in the spiritual life—with curiosity, caution, contempt? Whatever your typical posture is, what do you think is the wisest approach when we encounter a spiritual mystery?
3. Who might benefit from you passing along this book to them? How do you think they’d react to it?

Choose from Among These Discussion Questions (or Create Your Own)

1. Some skeptics insist that “death” means a person did not come back, so anyone who revives did not “die” and could not have experienced an afterlife. Others respond that this is circular reasoning. What do you think about this objection? (See also pp. 115–16)
2. How compelling is the conclusion that people are reunited with family and friends, and possibly even pets, in the afterlife? Is this mere wishful thinking? (pp. 116–19)
3. Does evidence for an *afterlife* mean there is evidence for *God*? Across the thousands of NDE testimonies, how strong is the case for a supreme being? (pp. 121–22)
4. Could the insights from NDE research assist in evangelistic efforts? The author suggests it might be “the ultimate apologetic” with some skeptics (p. 126). What do you think? Might the NDE evidence shape how you talk about the afterlife?
5. The NDE evidence seems to support much of Christian theology (pp. 124–26), but it also may stand in tension with other aspects, like the doctrine of salvation (pp. 127–29). Discuss this issue as well as the broader question of whether human observation (e.g., NDEs, scientific research, “general revelation”) can legitimately inform theology (pp. 130–31).
6. The NDE evidence, the author says, does not support “universalism,” the theory that everyone goes to heaven (pp. 133–34). Why? And if universalism is not true, then who goes where after physical death, and how do we know?
7. Regarding next steps, the author offers three: Rethink the meaning of life, rethink the meaning of death, and rethink how to get to heaven (pp. 134–35). As we complete this study, what practical changes—priorities, habits, relationships, etc.—do you feel nudged to reconsider, if any?

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and discuss it with friends!



Learn more about Michael Zigarelli at
michaelzigarelli.com