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Week 5/ WFL
James and Betty Robison
John Burke

James: Thank you all very much. I welcome you. I'm James Robison. Betty and I have a guest that we're really grateful to talk to. The book he has written is called *Imagine Heaven*. He has spent years talking to people, I mean hundreds of people who've had near-death experiences. John Burke, pastor of Gateway Church in Austin, he said that he had Gateway church before Gateway up here stole his name.

[Laughter]

He just has a wonderful, wonderful ministry and family there in Austin. They have three locations. But John Burke wrote a book, *Imagine Heaven*. I'm telling you, it's a New York Times bestseller. Let's talk to him. Would you like to? Let's welcome John Burke.

[Applause]

John: Thank you so much for having me on your show.

James: I hope you're taking care of my town down there. Your football team struggled over the years. Well, you won some! Alright, tell us about this.

John: Well, it started for me when I was a skeptic. When I was young I thought Jesus was probably a myth. I didn't know what I believed about God. But my father was dying of cancer. And one night I saw on his bedstand, someone had given him a book called *Life after Life*. And it was the first book...

James: Life after what?

John: Life after Life. It was the first book that coined the term "near-death experience." That's when someone has a heart attack or their brain wave cease. They are clinically dead and yet modern medicine resuscitates them. They come back talking about how, but I wasn't dead! There's something else!

I read that book in one night and I said at the end of it, oh my gosh! Jesus, I think you're real!

James: How old were you?

John: I was sixteen at the time. Now Moody, who wrote that book, was not a Christian. He didn't lead people that way. That's what I concluded just hearing their stories. So that took me on a journey. The next year was when I actually got into a small group Bible study, asked my questions, came to faith in Christ.

Since then, I went from a career in engineering, so I'm skeptical by nature. I ask a lot of questions. Into ministry, through seminary. So for the last 35 years I've not only intensely studied the Bible, but I have studied about a thousand of these near-death experiences because I've always wanted to understand what are those and how do they reconcile with what scripture says?

James: Tell me what you found out.

John: Well, what's really important is understanding that what people come back to try to describe is truly of another dimension. The best way to liken it is think about a painting on a wall, a black and white painting on a wall in a home here. Right?

Imagine if that's our world and our life and death is separation. So you get ripped out of that painting into this three-dimensional world of this room and you experience three dimensions of color but you've only known two dimensions and black and white. Now you're put back into the flat painting and you have to describe three dimensions of color in two dimensional black and white words. That's what people are trying to explain. So, as a result they are all interpreting an experience. So they are going to interpret it in their own framework.

Now, when you look at what they are commonly trying to say, and that's what I'm doing, is taking these thousand near-death experiences and I take about 120 of their stories to let you hear through their words how this actually correlates with what the Bible said all along about what we should expect of the life to come.

James: Did you find common experiences, descriptions, that you found consistent with what another said that in a skeptic's mind actually seemed to make sense and would have as a person then who's been studying the Bible, consistent, not contradictory of scripture?

John: Absolutely! Yes.

James: So I know you go over them very, very thoroughly in the book which is why it's a bestseller, which is why Betty and I heard about it, which is why Betty immediately started reading and was captivated by it. What are the common elements?

John: Well, the first is, when people die they don't feel dead. They feel more alive than they've ever been before. They say they come alive. And they have a body still, but it's a spiritual body. And they often say, it wasn't like I had five senses. I still could touch, taste... but I had more like 50 senses. And the senses were heightened, like sight that you could see for miles. Or hearing, or touch. Everything was supercharged.

Now, what's interesting is they usually stay within the room and are usually up above looking down at their own resuscitation. And in chapter two I write about skeptical doctors and the afterlife. And I write about many skeptical cardiologists and oncologists who, interviewing their patients, changed their view. They thought when you died it's lights out, done. You're over. And they changed their view to believe no, consciousness lasts beyond the grave. Now, whether they get it that it connects the Bible or not isn't always clear.

James: But they got that this doesn't seem to be the end?

John: Yeah! Because of very verifiable things that have been reported. So, for instance...

James: That are consistent?

John: Yeah. So this has been reported in the Journal of American Medical Association. About 900 scholarly journals have written on this now. Gallop poll says one out of 25 people have had a near-death experience. This is not uncommon. But Christians have not wrestled with okay, but we need to reconcile it to the scriptures. How do we do that? That's what I was trying to do. And it does.

So Paul said... I believe Paul had a near-death experience. Acts chapter 14 he's stoned to death, dragged out of the city, left for dead. And then he gets up and goes back into the city. Personally, I don't think I would have gone back in the city that just stoned me to death.

[Laughter]

James: He did refer to it like an out of body experience.

John: In First Corinthians 12 he says – he talks about himself fourteen years ago, whether in the body or out of the body I don't know. Why? Because you still feel like you have a body. And he talks about being taken up into heaven and seeing inexpressible things. Right? But he also talks about, in First Corinthians 15, that our bodies are sown a natural body, but they're raised a spiritual body. They're sown in weakness but they're raised in power.

James: Do many of them express that there's a power that they've sensed in this other realm?

John: The way they describe it is, “I had never felt so alive in my life.” They come back and they say this life is the shadow. That's the real thing. This is the less – We think of heaven and we think fuzzy, ethereal, boring, hanging out on clouds wishing you'd brought a magazine. Or people think it's going to be an endless church service. I'm a pastor and that sounds bad to me.

James: A lot of people just checked out.

[Laughter]

John: It's going to be life fully! That's what Jesus said. Hey, I'm going to prepare a place for you.

James: See, I really do believe that.

John: And this is what people consistently say. So yes, like in the Lancet, a medical journal in Europe, they wrote about a man who is brought into the hospital there. He was comatose. He had had a heart attack. The nurse realized before they intubated him and shocked his heart he had dentures. So they took the dentures out, put them in a lower drawer of the crash cart. His heart started beating but he never came to in the ER. Rolled him out to another room. A week later he comes to. He sees that nurse and says that's the nurse who knows where my lost dentures are.

[Laughter]

He tells who was in the ER room, said he was up above watching everything and that nurse took my dentures and put them in the lower drawer of the cart with all the bottles on it. And that's common.

James: And he's been out a week.

John: And there are many, many stories like that that have convinced people, okay, we really do live on. Now, what happens is what I'm trying to show. The beauty of heaven that Christians talk about, and that's what is so encouraging is more and more Christians were having these experiences and talking about them. Early on they didn't because new age researchers took it and interpreted what was being said in more of a new age slant.

For instance, all the experiences were good. Well, that's because only people who heard of these good experiences and had good experiences came forward. But since we found out no, that's not true, people don't often come forward but 23 percent of those who do come forward to share this, they don't come forward because it's so sacred to them, they don't want to be made fun of. 23 percent come forward saying they had hellish experiences. So they're not all good.

James: Horrific. More horrific than they might have imagined?

John: And I interview a tenured college professor who was an atheist who dies in Paris – duodenum ruptures. He can't get surgery. He dies. This is really important because I've discovered some interpretive keys to these stories. Because if you just go read near-death experience stories you could get really confused. Some things about how does that relate to the Bible? But they're some interpretive keys and one of them is that people often say there was a border or a boundary they knew they couldn't cross on the other side or they couldn't come back. So this is not full biological death. It's a peak end, but there is a border or a boundary you can't cross. So we can't tell from near-death experiences what eternity is like. We can tell that from what Jesus and the prophets told us, because God revealed it. So that's the bigger framework we've got to fit these into.

But Howard Storm, this professor, dies. He thought it was going to be lights out, but he's more alive than he's ever felt before, like 50 senses not just five. And another commonality is that people often have friends and relatives who have passed on before them come and welcome them. It is this joyous reunion. It's like this incredible, just bursting with joy – We're ourselves. We recognize each other. We still know our memories. We still – It's just life continued but much, much better because communication is purer. We know each other thought to thought.

James: Then, when they come back are they expressing disappointment, after where they were and -- ?

John: They don't want to be here. Many of them are depressed.

James: They thought they had really gotten to the ultimate?

John: Yeah. But this atheist college professor, initially it was all good, and he even had a group of people who were saying, "Come with us, Howard." And he thought they were hospital staff. He didn't know he was dead. He couldn't figure it out because he felt alive. But they were saying, "Come with us. We're going to help you." But they deceived him and led him into an outer darkness and it was horrific.

When I interviewed him, and out on our website, gatewaychurch.com, you can watch the interview in our message archives and he couldn't tell me about it. He said they did such horrific things that I've been trying to block it out. Because he had not crossed that boundary I think he still could call out to God.

He remembered when a neighbor brought him to Sunday school as a kid and a song came to his mind, Jesus Loves Me. That's all he could remember. And he wanted that to be true like nothing else. And he cries out, "Jesus, save me!" And he says into this utter blackness comes this brilliant man of light, brighter than the sun but not hard to look at, unconditional love, wraps him up, holds him to his chest. He is healed. Takes him out of there and there he gets a

life review. So he relives his life in the presence of Jesus and the angels and this is another commonality, by the way. So another commonality is that people all around the globe experience this brilliant God of light who is unconditional love. He knows them, he's personal, he knows their every thought and motive. And in his present state, review their lives. They re-experience their lives.

James: And all this is happening in rapid time.

John: Well, time, they say, is not the same. You experience past, present, and future in a different way. They say, "I don't know if it was an instant or I relive my whole life again." Which sounds an awful lot like Second Peter 3, "To the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years is like a day." Right?

So you start to see all these commonalities but all across the globe they don't describe the God of their culture, they describe the God of the Bible, the God who said I am the light of the world.

James: That's another consistency?

John: The God who is unconditional love. The God who knows them by name personally and they never want to leave his presence. They never want to leave his presence.

Now, another interpretive key, because what's confused Christians is why doesn't Jesus tell them I'm Jesus?

Because those who know Jesus, know he's Jesus. They absolutely know it. But Jesus said my sheep know my voice. They hear me and they follow me. Right? Sometimes we think, well, why doesn't God just tell them, I'm Jesus. As if he couldn't do that now if he wanted to. He's not limited. Right? So, he's doing these things on purpose.

What they do come back consistently knowing is that God is love and what he shows in their life review is the most important thing is how they treated all the people they interacted with and how love is what's most important and how every little action, for good or bad, had a ripple effect and mattered to him. So, love God and love people. That's what they come back with.

James: Amazing. The ultimate, the two great commands.

Betty, you've been studying that. So –

Betty: He mentioned earlier about some of the stories – every story it seems like they could not describe enough how beautiful, extraordinary everything was. Like you said, it was like depth after depth. Everything was alive.

John: And not unlike earth, and I interview people who like doctors and TWA airline pilots and like this college professor who then became a pastor. He left his tenured college professorship to become a Christian pastor, literally a Damascus road experience. But these people who don't need to make up crazy stories to go sell books and make money, and in fact it hurts their careers. Yet they are saying the same thing.

James: Well, you know, this is not the place anybody wants to miss. I don't think – I've met Jesus, and he's believable and I've experienced enough of the presence of heaven as he presents it in my life to be able to see. You can't embellish it beyond reality, the heaven is beyond embellishment. It's beyond exaggeration. It's beyond imagination. But it's real and he offers it, he offers a great peace that passes understanding now, and comfort. But eternity, you just don't want to miss it.

John: It's the hope we have. You know, God actually commands us to imagine heaven. Colossians 3:1 says set your minds on things above, not on things of the earth. Set your hearts where Christ is because your life is hidden there.

James: And it's beyond and greater than anything we could even comprehend.

John: It's going to be greater than we really can –

Betty: And I think if we can do that, grasp a little bit of heaven that God wants us to see, we would live differently here.

John: It changes how you live. And you know what, quite honestly? That's why I wrote this. I wrote it for two reasons. I wrote it for skeptics like I was because I think they'll see that okay, this is across the globe. This is all cultures, and yet they are describing the God of the Bible. And I show very clearly how that's true.

But secondly, for Christians, because I find so many Christians who live for retirement because they can imagine it. They can imagine golfing, and being with family and friends and enjoying life. But they haven't realized how great the ultimate retirement is going to be and we need to live for it and save for it and sacrifice for it.

James: And I love sharing life so I wouldn't ever want to retire from that. But I know I have eternal life.

Do you appreciate John taking the time to research and to investigate and talk to all these people? You can get the book in the bookstore.

John, we have led, literally, I think, by showing people where they can be the miracle long for and give them not only water for life, but the water of life, and there's tremendous joy. I want you to look in because every one of you that communicate with us, whether we see you in person or you communicate through email or in a note, you say, James and Betty, thank you for

letting us be the miracle someone longs for. You're going to want to be a miracle right here, and you can be. I want you to watch. This is where you can download a whole lot of heaven right here in somebody's life right now.

On the mission field

Open captions:

Just how thirsty am I?

Is there any place else I can go?

My only drinking water is defiled by animal waste.

I've seen what lives in that water.

I've watched as others have fallen ill from the things that I can't see.

My throat is parched and I am dried up like dust.

God, what I would do for some clean water to drink for me and my children.

Just how thirsty am I?

I guess I have no choice.

Please God, I thirst.

End of clip

In the studio

James: If you give just a cup of water in my name, Jesus said. Just a cup!

Betty, I'm not exaggerating when I say to our viewers that to know that we could touch your life in some positive way and point you to the source of life and joy and peace, now and everlasting, gives us a tremendous sense of gratitude and joy. And when you see a situation like that, that is as grave that she's just looking for water, and the heart cry of so many. And we can not only give a cup of water, we can give a well of water and we've been doing it.

And right now we are facing one of the greatest crisis according to the missionaries, where we emergency have to drill immediately, 188 wells. And we've got to find a way to get water,

where you can't get a drilling rig. So what we're asking for is a miracle, and the miracle is in your heart and in your hands. I believe our viewers are going to help us drill those water wells.

Betty: I believe you will too because you believe in miracles. And we can be a miracle to this mother, and to many other mothers like her as she watches children die and it breaks her heart. And she knows that if she gives them the water it's going to likely kill them, but they have to have the water to survive even for a day.

So please join with us and let's get the wells to them quickly so that they can have the opportunity to see their children grow up, just as we enjoy our children growing up.

James: Well, you know, with the great drilling rigs, and you have. You just gave another rig. Thank you, Lord. Thank you. Thank you for being the instrument God used. We can drill those wells in most areas in a matter of days. And then we can case them and give them a manual pump because in so many areas they have inconsistent power sources at best.

In some of the areas, in these outlying areas in the third world countries, they don't have power to their particular village or area. So we are giving them the greatest gift they will receive apart from the water of life, Jesus. And isn't it wonderful to know that it's because of the love of God in our heart that we're giving them the water that they so desperately need? But that because we've experienced that relationship with God, we're able to share the water of life with them. And once they've seen the love of God, we talk about him. Expressed through us, and meeting one of the greatest needs in their lives. It's so much easier for them to understand God's love. Would you please, please right now, we're asking you to make the greatest gift possible to give life.

The wells still cost, Betty, I'm being told this may be the last time we can keep them at \$4800. Well, they are that now.

Could you give a well or a part of a well? Is there any way that you could do that?

We're going to send you the most beautiful bronze that we have ever created for you. It's a determined eagle, determined to soar in the turbulence of the times and the challenges of the day. And one of the things we do in a challenge time is we joyfully meet the challenges of others. We let the love of God carry us and meet their need.

Would you right now, would you get your bankcard, go to the website you see, or dial the number that's always there as a prayer line, and make the gift God puts on your heart. If you can give a well, please do. A part of a well –

Remember this, \$48 will give ten people water the rest of their life. \$144 water for 30 people the rest of their life. There is a level at which you can participate.

We've got some beautiful gifts. We have a wonderful devotion book by Sheila Walsh, beautiful, beautiful print for the one that is so pretty that no greater name than the name of Jesus, that you can hang up someplace just to announce the truth. And you're going to be showing people the greatness of that person in your gift.

Right now, the website you see, or dial the number and make the gift God puts on your heart. Thank you so much for doing it.

Begin video clip

Announcer: Every day children living in extreme poverty are forced to make a dreadful choice, drink filthy polluted water filled with deadly disease or die from thirst. No child should ever be faced with this decision.

Our teams have recently located remote villages in southern Africa where children are dying from contaminated, disease ridden water. The situation is desperate. They need clean disease-free water immediately.

With your gift today you can help drill 188 water wells in remote villages across seven African nations. Your gift of \$24 will help provide clean water for five people. A gift of \$48 will help provide for ten. \$72 will provide for 15 people. And \$144 will help provide fresh disease-free water for 30 people for a lifetime!

With your gift we'll send you Sheila Walsh's devotional, 5 Minutes with Jesus, a fresh infusion of joy to help you find perspective in the midst of daily life and experience a deeper connection with God.

With your gift of \$100 or more you'll also receive our No Greater Name canvas, a beautiful artistic expression of our savior's name and a daily reminder of his presence in your life.

Finally, please consider a gift of \$1200 to help provide water for 250 people or a gift of \$4800 to help sponsor a complete well. And you may request our beautiful new hand-painted "Determined Eagle" bronze sculpture.

Please call, write, or make your gift online today!

End of clip

In the studio

James: I hope I can adequately express how much your love means to these – You're saving their lives and their families. Thank you so much, viewers of *LIFE Today*, sharing life today.

Imagine Heaven. Hmmm. When you have somebody there and now a lot of people for us, it becomes very special. We're not going to miss it. I think when you share this, and see it, you're going to help a lot of other people not miss it. You help us give a cup of water, the book is in the bookstore, but we'll be glad to send it to you if you would like to have it because we're going to experience heaven, and express it right here.

Would you thank John for sharing this with us?

John, I thank you for the effort, Buddy. Thank you and best to Gateway church there in the Austin area.

Thank you so much for watching the program. Thank you for being an answer to somebody's prayer!

Announcer: In his new book, *Living Amazed* James Robison shares how divine encounters can change your life. *Living Amazed* -- coming soon to online and retail bookstores.