

# THE NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCE

## WHY LATTER-DAY SAINTS ARE SO INTERESTED

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First published in 1975, the book *Life After Life* by Dr. Raymond A. Moody has sold over thirteen million copies worldwide. In this landmark book, Moody coined a new term to describe the phenomenon he had repeatedly encountered in his medical practice. The term *near-death experience* (NDE) is widely used today—both for good and for ill—depending on how a person views it. Subsequent books by Dr. Moody, such as *Reflections on Life After Life*, *The Light Beyond*, *Glimpses of Eternity*, and *Coming Back*, further examined dimensions of the near-death experience. More than seven million additional copies of these books were sold. Moody's work opened the publishing floodgates. Over the next forty-plus years have come hundreds of books, articles, documentaries, and even Hollywood movies on the subject. Moody and the study of near-death experiences that he founded are not without their critics, however. Criticism, concern, dismissal, and denunciation have also

surrounded this work, coming both from secular and religious circles. Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, whose groundbreaking book *On Death and Dying* was influential in the development of hospice services for the terminally ill, predicted such a reaction in the foreword she penned for Moody's *Life After Life*. "Dr. Moody will have to be prepared for a lot of criticism, mainly from two areas," Kubler-Ross wrote.

There will be members of the clergy who will be upset by anyone who dares to do research in an area which is supposed to be taboo. Some religious representatives of a denominational church have already expressed their criticism of studies like this. One priest referred to it as "selling cheap grace." Others simply [feel] that the question of life after death should remain an issue of blind faith and should not be questioned by anyone. The second group of people that Dr. Moody can expect to respond to his book with concern are scientists and physicians who regard this kind of study as "unscientific."<sup>1</sup>

Although there was the expected criticism and suspicion, it can be argued that Moody's books and the works of many other NDE researchers and experiencers have, to date, received greater acceptance among Latter-day Saints proportionally than those of other Christian faith traditions. Why are Latter-day Saints so interested in near-death experiences? What does The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints bring to the discussion? In my estimation, the answers to these questions are found in our *doctrine* and *history*. Let me illustrate how these two factors are intertwined in our beliefs regarding the afterlife and our reactions to modern research and reports of near-death experiences.

Shortly after the release of his book, *Life After Life*, Raymond Moody visited Salt Lake City as part of a publicity tour promoting the book. He was interviewed by the local media. One radio interview in particular highlighted the keen interest of the Latter-day Saint community in his topic. It was with the Church-owned radio station KSL, a 50,000-watt station whose broadcast signal could be received throughout the Intermountain West and beyond. What stood out to me from the program

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were the many comments and questions that came from the listening audience during the call-in portion of the program. Predictably, most were Latter-day Saints who asked Dr. Moody these “golden questions”: “How much do you know about The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints?” and “Would you like to know more?” Interestingly, that very month an article appeared in the *Ensign*, the Church’s official magazine, entitled “The Spirit World, Our Next Home.” Many of the radio listeners asked Dr. Moody if they could send him a copy. “I think I have already had about a hundred sent to me,” quipped Moody. Whether he knew it before that radio program or publishing his classic work, he knew it then—Latter-day Saints are keenly interested in what an ancient Book of Mormon prophet called “the state of the soul between death and the resurrection” (Alma 40:11). It has been so from the Church’s very formation.

Speaking in honor of his recently deceased friend, Joseph Smith Jr. declared in Nauvoo, Illinois, on 9 October 1843:

All men know that all men must die.— What is the object of our coming into existence. then dying and falling away to be here no more? This is a subject we ought to study more than any other, which we ought to study day and night.— If we have claim on our heavenly father for any thing it is for knowledge on this important subject— could we read and comprehend all that has been writtn from the days of Adam on the relation of man to God & angels. ~~and the spirits of just men~~ in a future state. we should know very little about it. could you gaze in heaven 5 minute. you would know more— than you possibly would can know by read[ing] all that ever was writtn on the subject.<sup>2</sup>

Recognizing, as the Prophet taught, that Heavenly Father has revealed “much knowledge on this important subject,” the doctrinal teachings as found both in canonical revelations and authoritative sermons of Church leaders are rich with insights into life beyond the grave. This knowledge, Latter-day Saints believe, not only gives us a glimpse past the doorway of death into eternity but also yields important perspective

into the purposes of life. Thus, the study of death and the afterlife is both faith affirming and life enriching. Explaining why he personally (as well as others of the leaders of the Church) spoke so frequently on this “important subject,” Elder Orson Pratt, a nineteenth-century Church Apostle and one of the Church’s greatest theologians, stated:

And do not forget to look forward to the joys ahead, if we do [forget], we will become careless, dormant, and sluggish, and we will think we do not see much ahead to be anticipated, but if we keep our minds upon the prize that lays ahead—upon the vast fields of knowledge to be poured out upon the righteous, and the glories that are to be revealed, and the heavenly things in the future state, we shall be continually upon the alert. . . . Let these things sink down in our minds continually, and they will make us joyful, and careful to do unto our neighbors as we would they should do unto us. Lest we should come short of some of these things is the reason I have [often] touched upon the future state of man . . . to stir up the pure minds of the Saints that we may prepare for the things that are not far ahead, and let all the actions of our lives have a bearing in relation to the future.<sup>3</sup>

These statements clearly illustrate how both our *doctrine* and *history* combine to create a fertile seedbed for our interest in near-death experiences and other accounts of what some may call “divine encounters” with life after death. Arguably, Latter-day Saints in the last several decades may have demonstrated more positive interest and acceptance of these things than adherents to Christian traditions. The side effects of such keen interest may be both positive and negative. Positive effects can include affirmation of one’s beliefs, deeper understanding of what lies beyond this life, comfort when a loved one dies, hope of a heavenly reunion with family and friends, deeper insight into the purposes of life, and greater love for and desire to accept God’s will. However, the downside or potentially dangerous side effects may include distortion of or distraction from the word of God and sound doctrinal teachings, false feelings of spiritual security, and even apostasy. So, for Latter-day

Saints, at least (and I assume for other Christians as well), interest in all things “beyond the grave” must also be tempered with some cautions and safeguards. With that said, let us now examine some Latter-day Saint doctrine and history that may serve as a basis for the intense interest for the near-death experience phenomenon. I’ll conclude with some words of caution and conviction.

## DOCTRINE

Since Raymond Moody first coined the term *near-death experience*, numerous other scientists and scholars have studied the phenomenon and have identified core elements of NDEs. Although each NDE is unique, some of the common characteristics include:

- Lifting out of one’s body and being able to observe other people, events, and activities going on (e.g., resuscitative efforts)
- Intense emotions: commonly of profound peace, well-being, and love
- Rapid movement through darkness, often toward an indescribable light—becoming “engulfed” in the Being of Light’s overwhelming love and knowledge
- A sense of being somewhere else, like a spiritual realm or world
- Incredibly rapid, sharp thinking and observations, enhanced senses and abilities
- Encounter with deceased loved ones, sacred figures, or unrecognized beings with whom communication is mind-to-mind
- A life review, reliving actions and feeling their emotional impact on others
- A flood of knowledge about life and the nature of the universe

- Sometimes a decision to return to the body

These core elements feel familiar to most Latter-day Saints because of unique teachings regarding the immortal human soul, the nature and capacities of the spirit body, and the purposes and conditions of the postearth spirit realm. There are many other doctrinal teachings—both authoritative and quasi-authoritative—that may be seen by Latter-day Saints as interesting similarities to or even important explanations of near-death experiences. There are many books in the literature (some I have even authored) that do just that, but for the purpose of this paper, I will briefly examine three doctrines—the immortality of the soul, the spirit body, and the purposes and conditions of the spirit world.

#### IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL

The canonical work known as the Doctrine and Covenants contains doctrine that Latter-day Saints believe came to Joseph Smith through revelation from God. In one section, we read that “man was also in the beginning with God [meaning before the world was created]. Intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created or made, neither indeed can be. . . . For man is spirit. The elements are eternal” (Doctrine and Covenants 93:29, 33).

In another canonical work known as the Pearl of Great Price, in the Book of Abraham, a vision of Abraham is recorded that likewise speaks of the eternal nature of man: “Now the Lord had shown unto me, Abraham, the intelligences that were organized before the world was; and among all these there were many of the noble and great ones. . . . [God] stood among those that were spirits, and he saw that they were good; and he said unto me: Abraham, thou art one of them; thou wast chosen before thou wast born” (Abraham 3:22–23).

Elaborating upon this doctrinal foundation, Joseph Smith taught in 1844 that “the Spirit of Man . . . existed from Eternity and will exist to eternity.”<sup>4</sup> A generation later in 1909, the First Presidency of the Church

authoritatively redeclared the doctrine of the Church that “all men existed in spirit before any man existed in the flesh.”<sup>5</sup>

Thus, Latter-day Saints believe that each of us lived as spirit beings before we were ever born into this world. Without an understanding of the doctrine of man’s premortal existence as spirits, it is virtually impossible to understand beliefs concerning the afterlife and the nature of spirits and the spirit world.

### SPIRIT BODY

The Doctrine and Covenants declares that the “spirit of man [is] in the likeness of his person” (Doctrine and Covenants 77:2). Similarly, we read in the previously cited 1909 First Presidency doctrinal declaration that the earthly body “is only the clothing of the spirit” and that “the spirit of man is in the form of man.”<sup>6</sup> There is a familiar object lesson taught that illustrates this doctrine. President Boyd K. Packer explained how the physical body is the tabernacle for the immortal spirit by comparing it to a glove and the spirit to a hand. The glove covers the hand, but the hand is the real living part. Death is like taking off the glove.<sup>7</sup> Brigham Young, prophetic successor to Joseph Smith likewise taught that if a person were to “take the spirit from the body, the body is lifeless.”<sup>8</sup>

Because of Latter-day Saint teaching that our spirits are immortal, having lived with God before being clothed with a physical body at birth, Church members understand that a spirit body, with all its unique features and capacities, continues to live even after the physical body dies. Perhaps we Latter-day Saints take this doctrine for granted. For many near-death experiencers of other faiths, it comes as a great surprise that at their death they still had a body of some sort. No wonder Latter-day Saints feel a sense of spiritual kinship to those who report experiences such as these:

- “To my surprise,” one experiencer reported, “I found that I still had hands, and feet, and a body, for I had always regarded the souls as a something without shape and void.

. . . To find, that though I was dead I still had form was new to me.”<sup>9</sup>

- An eighteenth-century man who had what could be called an encounter with the afterlife wrote: “On the basis of all my experience . . . I can insist that [spirits] are completely people in form. They do have faces, eyes, ears, chests, arms, hands, and feet. They do see each other, hear each other, and talk with each other. In short, nothing proper to man whatever is missing, except they are not clothed with a material body.”<sup>10</sup>
- Dr. George Ritchie in his classic near-death experience account recorded in *Return from Tomorrow*, expressed shock that he could actually see his dead body lying on the bed he had just left. “I was me, wide awake, only without a physical body to function in,” Ritchie reported.<sup>11</sup>
- Dr. Raymond Moody reported that many of the NDErs he studied reported they had a body of some sort that “mimicked the contours of their physical form.”
- Based on her years of hearing the near-death experiences of those with whom she worked, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross concluded that the spiritual body is an exact replica of the physical body, “lacking only its defects.”<sup>12</sup>

That the spirit body lacks the defects, deterioration, and deficiencies common to the earthly body is also fundamental in Latter-day Saint doctrine. Brigham Young spoke of the physical body as being a “coarser organization” in comparison to the perfect spirit body.<sup>13</sup> “It [the spirit] is not encumbered with this clog of dirt we are carrying around here so that when we advance in years we have to be stubbing along and be careful lest we fall down. . . . But yonder, how different! . . . Here we are continually troubled with ills and ailments of various kinds, . . . but in the spirit world we are free from all this and enjoy life, glory, and intelligence.”<sup>14</sup> To Latter-day Saints, it is a comforting doctrine to know that the physical limitations will fall away, that disease and sickness in the

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spirit world are nonexistent, and that aging and handicaps are nowhere to be found. To many members, much of modern near-death research is fascinating, not because it teaches anything new doctrinally about the spirit world but because it confirms those truths that they accept as revelations from God. A couple of examples illustrate this:

- Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross observed that terminally ill patients who had near-death experiences reported that their spirit bodies were healthy and strong. “Quadriplegics are no longer paralyzed,” she wrote, “multiple sclerosis patients who have been in wheelchairs for years say that when they were out of their bodies, they were able to sing and dance.”<sup>15</sup>
- Dr. Kenneth Ring, one of the world’s foremost near-death experience researchers (who is not a Latter-day Saint) conducted a groundbreaking study of people who had been born blind—never having had any vision whatsoever—who had near-death experiences and reported being able to clearly see. Though they never had seen colors or light or anything before in their lives, they described in detail people, colors, scenes, and so forth, they saw in the spirit realm.<sup>16</sup>
- A man who lost a large portion of his leg in an accident saw, in his out-of-body experience, the doctors working on his maimed body. He said, “I could feel my [spirit] body, and it was whole. . . . I felt that all of me was there.”<sup>17</sup>

Because of the long-held doctrine of the spirit body, these kinds of NDE experiences make perfect sense to Latter-day Saints, even though they may leave some medical doctors and scientists scratching their heads.

In addition to the perfection of the spirit body, Latter-day Saints believe that once freed from the limitations of the physical body, spirits have enhanced capacities and powers relating to communication, movement, and activities. From the Doctrine and Covenants, Church members learn that “all spirit is matter, but it is more fine and pure, and can only

be discerned by purer eyes” (Doctrine and Covenants 131:7). The refined, pure nature of spirit matter affects how the spirit moves about, communicates, learns, and comprehends. Within the doctrinal teachings of Church Apostles, numerous statements about this can be found. Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, and the Pratt brothers—Orson and Parley, two of the great Latter-day Saint theological minds—repeatedly taught of the remarkable powers possessed by the departed righteous while in the spirit world. Joseph Smith taught that the spirits of the faithful possessing a portion of God’s infinite power are “enveloped in flaming fire”—fire representing God’s glory and power.<sup>18</sup>

### THE SPIRIT WORLD

The Book of Mormon provides Latter-day Saints with direct teaching regarding life after death. The ancient prophet Alma recorded that “there is a space between the time of death and the resurrection” (Alma 40:9). Expounding upon that doctrine, Alma explained that he learned from an angel concerning the “state of the soul between death and the resurrection.” He recorded:

Behold, it has been made known unto me . . . that the spirits of all men, as soon as they are departed from this mortal body, yea, the spirits of all men, whether they be good or evil, are taken home to that God who gave them life.

And then shall it come to pass, that the spirits of those who are righteous are received into a state of happiness, which is called paradise, a state of rest, a state of peace, where they shall rest from all their troubles and from all care, and sorrow. (Alma 40:11–12)

In stark contrast to the blessed state of the faithful who enter into a paradise at death, Alma explained that the wicked—those who in life “chose evil works rather than good”—are in “darkness, and a state of awful, fearful looking” forward to the “wrath of God” that will ultimately befall them. “Thus they remain in this state,” Alma declared, “as well

as the righteous in paradise until the time of their resurrection” (Alma 40:13–14).

Latter-day Saints accept subsequent revelations and teachings of latter-day prophets and apostles within the Church that amplify Book of Mormon teachings on the world of spirits who are righteous, wicked, and everything in between. From latter-day prophets and apostles, members learn that the primary purpose for the spirit world is continued progression and preparation for the resurrection—all humankind being given a full opportunity to accept the Lord and his gospel. Shortly before his death in 1844, Joseph Smith taught the Latter-day Saints that “all those [who] die in the faith go to the prison of spirits to preach to the dead . . . that they may live according to God in the spirit . . . and [be made] happy by these means.”<sup>19</sup> On another occasion, the Prophet taught that knowledge of Christ and his gospel “saves a man, and in the world of spirits a man cannot be exalted but by [this] knowledge; so long as a man will not give heed to the commandments, he must abide without salvation.”<sup>20</sup>

In the Doctrine and Covenants section 138 is recorded perhaps the single greatest doctrine on the subject of the work of the spirit world. It is a vision given to Church President Joseph F. Smith on 3 October 1918. From it, members understand that the faithful, righteous disciples of Christ, who have embraced the fullness of his gospel, teach those spirits who did not have the opportunity to learn of it in life. This is a foundational doctrine that gives life and understanding to most of all other Latter-day Saint beliefs regarding life after death.

In addition to this doctrine, which has come to be known as the “work of salvation for the dead,” perhaps the most inspiring and comforting doctrine taught concerning the spirit world (and ultimately the resurrection of the dead) has to do with the joyful reunion that one who dies has with family and friends on the other side of the veil of death. “I have a father, brothers, children, and friends who have gone to a world of spirits,” Joseph Smith declared. “They are only absent for a moment; they are in the spirit, and we shall soon meet again. . . . When we depart

[from this life], we shall hail our mothers, fathers, friends, and all whom we love who have fallen asleep in Jesus. . . . It will be an eternity of felicity.”<sup>21</sup> Brigham Young likewise testified of a glorious reunion with loved ones. “We have more friends behind the veil [of death] than on this side, and they will hail us more joyfully than you were ever welcomed by your parents and friends in this world; and you will rejoice more when you meet them than you ever rejoiced to see a friend in this life.”<sup>22</sup>

As cited earlier, one of the core elements of near-death experiences is the encountering of loved ones. It is one of the most commonly cited experiences of those who have in some manner glimpsed beyond the veil of death. Latter-day Saints are drawn to such accounts because they seem to confirm their deep-seated belief in eternal families and “that [the] same sociality,” as Joseph Smith characterized it, “which exists among us here will exist among us there, only it will be coupled with eternal glory” (Doctrine and Covenants 130:2).

These are just a few of the Latter-day Saint doctrine and teachings concerning life beyond the grave—like a mere snowflake on the tip of the iceberg. Authors Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang commented on the depth and breadth of the Latter-day Saint theology of the afterlife in their book, *Heaven: A History*, published by Yale University Press.

While most contemporary Christian groups neglect afterlife beliefs, what happens to people after they die is crucial to LDS teachings and rituals. Heavenly theology is the result not of mere speculation, but of revelation given to past and present church leaders. . . .

There has been . . . no alteration of the LDS understanding of the afterlife since its articulation by Joseph Smith. If anything, the Latter-day Saints in the twentieth century have become bolder in their assertion of the importance of their heavenly theology. . . . In the light of what they perceive as a Christian world which has [largely] given up belief in heaven, many Latter-day Saints feel even more responsibility to define the meaning of death and eternal life.<sup>23</sup>

Clearly, it is the similarities with our extensive teachings on the subject that draw Latter-day Saints to the many, many accounts of near-death experiences. Yet doctrine is not the only factor. Latter-day Saints also have a rich historical heritage with the near-death experience phenomenon.

## HISTORY

From the earliest days of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to the present, accounts of near-death or out-of-body experiences have been shared from pulpits—even in the general conferences of the Church, published in official Church publications, discussed in formal Church settings like Sunday School classes as well as in informal settings among friends and neighbors. This historical connection to the phenomenon gives a semblance of credibility and acceptance. No wonder books written by near-death experiencers and those seeking to interpret and give meaning to such experiences, whether authored by members or not, are very popular among Latter-day Saints. Here are just a few examples of this historical pedigree:

- Joseph Smith's mother, Lucy Mack Smith in her *History of Joseph Smith by His Mother* wrote of the powerful impact of the near-death experience that her sister Lovisa Mack Tuttle had in 1784.<sup>24</sup>
- One experience is particularly remarkable. It involves Joseph Smith Jr. himself. Most Latter-day Saints are familiar with an 1832 event in Hiram, Ohio where Joseph was beaten, tarred, and feathered by his enemies. What may not so familiar is the account of Joseph's out-of-body experience at the time. His wife, Emma Hale Smith, remembered:

The converts to Mr. Smith's preaching were constantly arriving from all parts of the country, [which

added] greatly to the disturbance of antagonists to the Mormon religion, and in March, 1832, the most violent persecution followed. Mr. Smith was dragged from his bed, beaten into insensibility, tarred and feathered and left for dead. A strange part of this experience was, that his spirit seemed to leave his body, and that during the period of insensibility he consciously stood over his own body, feeling no pain, but seeing and hearing all that transpired.<sup>25</sup>

- In 1838, Phoebe Woodruff, the wife of Latter-day Saint apostle Wilford Woodruff, became seriously ill and apparently died. Wilford recounted: “The sisters gathered around her body, weeping, while I stood looking at her in sorrow. The spirit and power of God began to rest upon me until, for the first time during her sickness faith filled my soul, although she lay before me as one dead.” Woodruff then recounts how he anointed her with oil in the name of the Lord and “rebuked the power of death” and commanded her to be made alive. “Her spirit returned to her body, and from that hour she was made whole.” Later Phoebe related to her husband and those present that as she was being anointed with oil, “her spirit left her body, and she saw it lying upon the bed, and the sisters weeping. She looked at them and at [Wilford], and upon her babe, and while gazing upon this scene, two personages came into the room. . . . One of these messengers informed her that she could have her choice: she might go to rest in the spirit world, or, on one condition she could have the privilege of returning to her tabernacle and continuing her labors upon the earth. The condition was, if she felt that she could stand by her husband, and with him pass through all the cares, trials, tribulation, and afflictions of life which he would be called to pass through for the gospel’s sake unto the end. When she looked upon

the situation of her husband and child, she said: 'Yes, I will do it!' At that moment her spirit [again] entered her tabernacle."<sup>26</sup>

- As the pioneers were crossing the plains, Brigham Young himself experienced two (and possibly more) near-death experiences on 17 February 1847. A seriously ill Brigham Young told his associate and fellow apostle, Willard Richards, "I actually went into Eternity last Wednesday week and came back again."<sup>27</sup> These experiences undoubtedly influenced Young's sermons regarding the conditions of the spirit world, the capacities of departed spirits. He spoke often on the subject. "I can say with regard to parting with our friends, and going ourselves," Young declared in 1871. "I have been near enough to understand eternity so that I have had to exercise a great deal more faith to desire to live that I ever exercised in my whole life to live. The brightness and glory of the next apartment is inexpressible."<sup>28</sup>
- Jedediah M. Grant, second counselor to Brigham Young in the First Presidency of the Church (and father of later Church president, Heber J. Grant), had an extensive near-death experience shortly before his death in 1856. He detailed his experience to President Heber C. Kimball, first counselor in the First Presidency, who publicly recounted it at Grant's funeral:

He said to me, brother Heber, I have been into the spirit world two nights in succession, and, of all the dreads that ever came across me, the worst was to have to again return to my body, though I had to do it. . . .

[Grant] also spoke of the buildings he saw there, remarking that the Lord gave Solomon wisdom and poured gold and silver into his hands that he might display his skill and ability, and said that the temple erected by Solomon was much

inferior to the most ordinary buildings he saw in the spirit world.

In regards to the gardens, say brother Grant, “I have seen good gardens on this earth, but I never saw any to compare with those that were there. I saw flowers of numerous kinds, and some with fifty to a hundred different colored flowers growing upon one stalk.” . . .

After speaking of the gardens and beauty of every thing there, brother Grant said that he felt extremely sorrowful at having to leave so beautiful a place and come back to earth, for he looked upon his body with loathing, but was obliged to enter it again.<sup>29</sup>

- In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, numerous near-death experience accounts of prominent Church leaders or their family members such as Lorenzo Dow Young (brother of Brigham Young), George Albert Smith, Jacob Hamblin, George Brimhall, and other Church members were published in the official publications of the Church such as the *Juvenile Instructor*, *Relief Society Magazine*, *Elders' Journal*, and *Improvement Era*. Additionally, hundreds of spirit world encounters, near-death experiences, or visions can be found in the Church's historical archives.
- A 1920 account of a vision of or encounter with the spirit world by Heber Q. Hale, stake president in Boise, Idaho, is one of the most often quoted accounts. It has been published in a variety of sources. His descriptions of the spirit world correspond remarkably with other accounts, regardless of the denomination.

Although there is long and rich history of Latter-day Saint near-death experiences, it has not always been without controversy. In recent generations, there have been some books containing near-death

experiences authored by Church members and published by non-Church publishing outlets that have generated official criticism by the Church and much nonofficial expressions of concern or denunciation in many private circles. In response to one such publication, the Church recently issued the following official statement: “The writings and speculations of individual Church members, some of which have gained currency recently, should be considered as personal accounts or positions that do not reflect Church doctrine.”<sup>30</sup> That leads to some general cautions regarding how we (particularly Latter-day Saints) should view near-death experience accounts that are becoming ubiquitous in popular culture.

## CAUTIONS

In her foreword to Dr. Raymond Moody’s *Life After Life* cited earlier, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross warned that clergy may be upset by his near-death experience research. We have certainly seen that reaction in the forty years since—both in Christianity in general and the Latter-day Saints specifically. Prominent Christian clergy and theologians have railed against the NDE phenomenon. Ironically, many of the latest books and movies are coming from evangelical Christians, much to the chagrin of other evangelicals. Latter-day Saints, despite their doctrine and history regarding the spirit world, have also had their share of similar reactions. Concerns seem to fall into two main categories: (1) the tendency to make the sacred common or, even worse, sensational, and (2) the inclination among some Latter-day Saints (and probably other Christians as well) to seek after these kinds of experiences as a substitute or easy and tantalizing alternative to seeking truth from the word of God, creating, in essence, a kind of “pop” gospel.

While most of these accounts and publications may be intended to inspire and edify, and they often fill that intent, the way some are marketed or publicized seems exploitative, intentionally or unintentionally,

and the stories become sensationalized. To the extent that such accounts become popular, one hopes that it is because they are true and good and stimulate believers to more fully study their faith tradition's doctrine and scriptural teachings, and not because they offer an easier or more exciting and engaging version of the gospel than the simple, basic doctrinal teachings about the afterlife.

While NDEs and similar accounts may be interesting and even inspiring to a certain extent, they must never become a substitute for the imperative study and application of the scriptures and prophetic counsel, which are essential to obtaining and maintaining saving faith. Accounts of spiritual encounters with the afterlife cannot change lives and build strength to serve God and resist temptation with the same power and certainty as the word of God.

Furthermore, some of these NDE stories and accounts may set forth mistaken or false doctrines that can lead one astray or mislead others about truth. That is why faithful Latter-day Saints view NDEs only as a side dish, never the main course. They are never an adequate source of doctrine or replacement for faith. Relying only on such fare for one's spiritual nourishment will inevitably cause spiritual starvation. Some things are interesting. Others are imperative.

## CONVICTION

Shifting gears from a more academic perspective to a more personal one, let me conclude with my statement of conviction. I have extensively studied near-death experiences in the context of their parallels to Latter-day Saint doctrine for three decades. While my beliefs may be affirmed by such study, my faith does not come from it. My conviction of life after death comes to me from God. Death still hurts. Separation from loved ones is still painful. But I am comforted by my hope for a joyful reunion someday and a glorious resurrection. I add my conviction

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to these poetic words penned by the late Church President Gordon B. Hinckley:

What is this thing that men call death,  
This quiet passing in the night?  
'Tis not the end, but genesis  
Of better worlds and greater light.  
O God, touch Thou my aching heart,  
And calm my troubled, haunting fears.  
Let hope and faith, transcendent, pure,  
Give strength and peace beyond my tears.  
There is no death, but only change  
With recompense for victory won;  
The gift of Him who loved all men,  
The Son of God, the Holy One.<sup>31</sup>

## NOTES

1. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, foreword to *Life After Life* by Raymond A. Moody Jr. (New York: Bantam Books, 1976).
2. Andrew H. Hedges, Alex D. Smith, and Brent M. Rogers, eds., *Journals, Volume 3: May 1843–June 1844*, vol. 3 of the Journals series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Ronald K. Esplin and Matthew J. Grow (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2015), 109.
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4. "Conference Minutes," *Times and Seasons*, 15 August 1844, 615.
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