

The Boy Who Came Back from Heaven

Discussion Guide

Introduction

1. Describe Heaven as you understand it. What forms the basis of your understanding?
2. What does the author mean when he says, “There is an unseen world at work—an intensely active spiritual dimension right here on earth, all around us. And much of this activity keeps us from focusing on our future destination” (pages x-xi)? How does this relate to what you’ve observed in your own life?
3. What is your initial reaction to Alex’s story? to other stories of supernatural experiences?
4. What are you hoping to learn from following “Alex on his journey to Heaven and back”?

Chapter 1: At the Crossroads

1. Describe the tension Kevin feels at the beginning of this chapter—between joy and responsibility, thankfulness and debt. How does this affect Kevin’s life and the life of his family? Have you experienced this tension? Explain.
2. What was your response to Pastor Gary Brown’s sermon? What significance does God’s name Jehovah-jireh (“the LORD will provide”) have for you?
3. What was your reaction to Kevin’s description of the car wreck and the first minutes after the accident? Can you see evidence of God’s mercy even then? If so, explain.

4. Does Alex's perspective help you better understand the accident? Explain.

Chapter 2: Three Journeys

1. Describe Kevin's anguish caused by having to wait at the local hospital knowing his son has been flown elsewhere. Can you relate to how Kevin was feeling? Explain.
2. Discuss the guilt Kevin feels after the accident. How does his guilt compare with the guilt the devil tries to make Alex feel (see page 14)? What does this teach you about guilt and Satan, our accuser?
3. What effect does Dave's conversation with Beth have? How do you think you would have responded to Dave's claim?
4. What does Alex's interaction with Jesus reveal about Jesus? about Alex?

Chapter 3: 72 Hours

1. What do Kevin's stories about Alex's birth and earlier childhood reveal about Alex? about the bond between father and son?
2. Why do you think Pastor Brown's prayer in the waiting room (see page 36) makes such an impact on Kevin?
3. Both Beth and Kevin release Alex to God's care shortly after the accident. Explain when each does so. What effect do you think their prayers of relinquishment have on their sense of peace and hope?
4. Local churches rally around the Malarkeys immediately after the accident. Who is impacted by their service? In what ways?

5. What do you think Alex means when he says, “Heaven is not the next world; it is now” (page 47)?

Chapter 4: An Army Gathers

1. Discuss Kevin’s comments on “nice” as applied to Christians and the Christian faith (see page 52). Do you agree that it is “revealing that Jesus, the apostle Paul, and all of the great saints of the Bible were *never* described as nice”? Why or why not?
2. How does 1 John 4:4 (“the Spirit who lives in you is greater than the spirit who lives in the world”) apply to the Malarkeys’ situation? Have you seen this verse apply to circumstances in your own life? Give examples.
3. What is the tension between science and the sovereignty of God in Alex’s story? In what ways (if any) do you feel this tension elsewhere?
4. When Kevin’s friend tells him that Alex will become an influential pastor, he says, “It makes me as uncomfortable as you seem to be” (see page 62). Why is the friend uncomfortable? Have you ever had to deliver an “uncomfortable” message?

Chapter 5: Miracles, Messes, and More Miracles

1. Discuss Kevin’s statement on page 70: “It is one thing to read the Scriptures and affirm their truth. But until you are in the trenches of trial, until you are faced with life circumstances that test your faith, until you are pressed to the absolute limit of your physical and emotional capacity, until you face the unrelenting stress of ongoing trauma, you never really know how you’ll respond to what you may have embraced so easily during a comfortable Bible study.”
2. Kevin says, “It’s ingrained in us to earn our own way, to pay back any little favor, and never to be on the debt side of the ledger” (page 76). If you have ever been “on the debt side of the ledger,” how did it feel?
3. Discuss Kevin’s father’s perspective on Alex’s condition. Did it surprise you? Why or why not?

4. Kevin says, “It’s possible to know peace and pain at the same time” (page 80) and “Nothing good ever comes to pass without a price” (page 81). Have you found these statements to be true in your own life? Explain.
5. How does Alex describe angels? Does his description confirm or contradict your own understanding of angels?

Chapter 6: We Meet Another World

1. Discuss the tension Kevin and Beth face as they try to reconcile God’s promise that Alex will be healed with the reality of his severe injuries.
2. In what ways do Sue’s experience and the artist’s painting of angels behind Alex seem to support the Malarkeys belief that God is intervening in time and space to heal Alex?
3. What do you learn about faith from the poem Kevin writes soon after Alex first emerges from his coma (pages 102–103)?
4. Why is the speech therapist’s warning that Alex may never be able to respond such a devastating moment for Kevin? How does his analogy to Peter’s walking on water apply? Have you ever been in a similar situation? Explain.
5. Discuss Kevin’s, Alex’s, and Margaret’s account of the angels in Alex’s hospital room.

Chapter 7: Homecomings

1. Does Alex’s attitude through his early stages of recovery surprise you? Why or why not?
2. How does Beth respond to Alex’s story of the accident? What do you think she took away from that experience?

3. Discuss Kevin's statement with regard to his limited knowledge of what bringing Alex home would entail: "God will be with us whenever we go through deep waters, supplying the grace we need. Perhaps that's why I didn't know that this was only the first of twelve ambulance trips that Alex and I would take in the next few months" (page 126). Has God ever shown you grace in a similar manner? Explain.
4. How would you sum up the benefits and challenges that come with Alex going home?
5. What are the results of Kevin and Alex's conversation about the accident? Describe the power of forgiveness in your own life.
6. "[God] was the only reason we had come this far without giving in to utter despair" (page 139). How have you seen this displayed in the Malarkeys' story? How do you maintain hope in difficult situations?

Chapter 8: War and Peace

1. What are your thoughts about the message that Alex "will be fully healed"? Why was Kevin so reluctant to accept it?
2. What might Kevin have missed out on had he not been obedient to the prompting to go forward in church to pray?
3. What does Alex mean when he says "I'm being attacked"? Have you ever felt attacked by the devil? What does Scripture teach about standing up to Satan's attacks?
4. Why are the Malarkeys uncomfortable with installing a permanent ramp to their house? Is this discomfort justified? Why or why not?
5. What is your reaction to Alex's interacting with angels? to Kevin's reflections on these encounters (see pages 166–169)?

6. How does Alex describe the devil and demons? How does this compare and contrast with how you view them?

Chapter 9: Endings and Beginnings

1. Why is Alex reluctant to share many of his experiences in Heaven? What is your reaction?
2. What is Kevin and Alex's purpose in publishing this book? In your opinion, have they succeeded? Explain.
3. Kevin mentions feeling "supernaturally challenged" (page 185) at times when he interacts with Alex. Have you ever felt that way? Explain.
4. Alex says he knows God is using what happened in the car accident for good. In what ways do you think that is true?

Chapter 10: The Road Ahead

1. What did you learn from the Malarkeys' efforts to include Alex in their everyday activities?
2. What is your response to Kevin's statement, "When God gives you something to do, you just do it. What seems foreign to someone else is normal for us. Every one of us will, to some degree or another, be faced with a new normal sometime in life" (pages 195–196)? Have you ever had to face a "new normal"? Describe that experience and how you dealt with it.
3. Describe Alex's attitude after his surgeries. What is responsible for his outlook?
4. How does Kevin reconcile his belief in Alex's full healing with Alex's not yet being healed today? How might you reconcile these things?