THE CASE FOR
Heaven

A Journalist Investigates
Evidence for Life After Death

LEE STROBEL

ZONDERVAN
BOOKS

The most obvious fact of life is that *everybody dies*. It would be irrational and foolish to live our entire lives unprepared for what we know is inevitable! That's why reading this book will be one of the wisest investments of time you'll ever make. It will end your worrying and wondering, your fretting and fearing, about life after death. Instead, you'll gain the confidence and peace of mind that come from settling your eternal destiny.

Dr. Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life* and the *Daily Hope* broadcast

This is the most powerfully uplifting and extensively researched book I have ever read on the subject of heaven. If you've struggled to know what to believe and why, you will find your answers in these pages. Every human being should have the privilege of reading this book.

Sheila Walsh, author of *Holding On When You Want to Let Go*

The Case for Heaven engages both the mind through convincing evidence and the heart through personal narratives and discoveries. I hope that you—whether a Christian or a skeptic—will read, discuss, and share this book with others.

Sean McDowell, PhD, associate professor of apologetics at Talbot School of Theology and coauthor of *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*

Lee Strobel is a national treasure. In *The Case for Heaven*, he answers tough questions, removes obstacles to belief, and gives us confidence in why we can believe that heaven is a beautiful reality we can look forward to experiencing.

Bestselling author Derwin Gray, lead pastor, Transformation Church

Lee Strobel tackles challenging questions about reincarnation, annihilation, and hell as he makes a convincing, compelling case for heaven. He helps the reader overcome the fear of death. I plan on getting two copies—one to keep as a reference and one to give to a skeptic.

Anne Graham Lotz, author of *Jesus in Me*

The Case for Heaven may be Lee Strobel's best book yet. Well-researched and clearly written, it presents the evidence for heaven powerfully and faces the best arguments against it with honesty. It is so engaging and inspiring that it's difficult to put it down.

J. P. Moreland, distinguished professor of philosophy,
Talbot School of Theology, Biola University, and author
of *A Simple Guide to Experience Miracles*

As a detective, I wish Lee Strobel had been my partner because—as always—he leaves no stone unturned. His interviews will open your eyes and encourage your soul. *The Case for Heaven* is a must-read and a powerful addition to Lee's seminal "Case For" book series.

J. Warner Wallace, *Dateline*-featured cold-case detective,
senior fellow at the Colson Center for Christian Worldview, and
author of *Person of Interest* and *Cold-Case Christianity*

Prepare to be taken on a journey of hearing key insights from experts in their field and heartfelt honesty from those facing death. *The Case for Heaven* may challenge the status quo, but it will not disappoint.

Neuroscientist Sharon Dirckx (PhD, Cambridge),
author of *Am I Just My Brain?*

Lee Strobel has done it again, this time with a fascinating, challenging, thoughtful, and moving book on the realities of heaven—and hell. Through his keen research, skillful storytelling, and apt interviews with experts, Strobel makes a compelling case for the historic Christian doctrine of the afterlife.

Douglas Groothuis, philosophy professor, Denver Seminary

If this book were a television show, it might be called *Touched by the Truth*. Let this impressive array of experts impact your life and faith with the evidence for the world to come. You'll be encouraged as you encounter the compelling case for the life that awaits you.

Emmy-nominated actress, producer, and *New York*
Times bestselling author Roma Downey

This investigator doesn't shrink from bringing up the tough topics. Lee Strobel reminds us how the gospel insightfully addresses our most challenging intellectual questions and how it powerfully meets our deepest human needs.

Paul Copan, Pledger Family Chair of Philosophy and Ethics, Palm Beach Atlantic University, and author of *Is God a Moral Monster?*

No one today is more fit to make the case for heaven than Lee Strobel, the man who wrote *The Case for Easter.* If Jesus was raised from the dead to the right hand of the Father, heaven is a reality. The one implies the other, and Lee knows it.

Scot McKnight, professor of New Testament, Northern Seminary, and author of *The Heaven Promise* and *A Church Called Tov*

Some years ago, there was a movie titled *Heaven Can Wait*. But the truth is, heaven *can't* wait, and questions about heaven, hell, and the hereafter must be reckoned with sooner rather than later. *The Case for Heaven* is a great place to begin.

Don Sweeting, president, Colorado Christian University

The Case for Heaven showcases why Lee Strobel is among the most unique and interesting writers of our time. In an age of pandemic, depression, and violence, I'm thrilled that Lee has focused his attention on this question of eternal significance.

John Stonestreet, president of the Colson Center and host of the *BreakPoint* podcasts

THE CASE FOR
Heaven

Also by Lee Strobel

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For Nabeel Qureshi—
I'll see you on the other side!

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Introduction

Can We Know There's a Heaven?

Is this dying? Why, this is bliss . . . Earth is receding; Heaven is opening; God is calling. I must go.

DWIGHT L. MOODY, JUST BEFORE HIS DEATH

My eyes fluttered. They opened and struggled to focus. My mind fought confusion. I was on my back, stretched out on a firm surface below a bright light. A face came into view, looking at me—a doctor, his surgical mask pulled down.

"You're one step away from a coma," he said. "Two steps away from dying."

My eyelids sagged shut. I drifted back into unconsciousness—a welcomed relief from the grotesque hallucinations that had plagued me.

At times like this, hovering over the hazy border between life and death, the afterlife is no longer a mere academic topic to be researched, analyzed, and debated. Heaven and hell, our existence beyond the grave, become desperately relevant. They're all that matter.

I know what you're thinking: *Poor guy; he almost died.* But here's what *I'm* thinking: *Just wait until it happens to you!*

Because it will. One way or another, next week or in decades, you're going to creep up to the dividing line between now and

forever. When you slip from this world, what will you find? A void of nonexistence? A dark realm of regret and recrimination? Or a reality that's more vivid, more exhilarating, more rewarding, more *real* than anything you've ever known? At that moment, in the midst of that existential transition, nothing will be more important. And if it will matter so much then, isn't it worth investigating now?

When I was an atheist, I thought I knew what awaited me after my heart stopped pumping and my brain waves flattened. *Nothing.* My existence would cease. Activity in the world would continue unabated, but I would be absent. It was difficult—and disconcerting—to imagine.

After my wife announced that she had become a follower of Jesus, I used my journalism and legal training to investigate whether there was any credibility to Christianity or any other religion. I concluded after nearly two years that there's persuasive evidence that Jesus indeed is the unique Son of God. I ended up leaving my newspaper career to tell others what I had learned.

Of course, the Christian faith gave me a whole different picture of eternity. The Bible talks about a vivid postmortem realm. Though this is embedded in overall Christian theology, I never really studied whether there was specific evidence or compelling logic to support this heavenly vision. Essentially, I set much of the issue aside for a while. After all, I was young and healthy.

Then came that Thursday evening in the summer of 2011 when Leslie found me unconscious on our bedroom floor. The ambulance took me to a hospital in nearby Parker, Colorado, where the emergency room physician gave me the dire news that I was on the precipice of death.

It turned out I had a rare medical condition called *hyponatremia*, a frighteningly sharp drop in my blood sodium level that caused my brain to swell and threatened to snuff out my existence. Suddenly, it wasn't enough to have a few inchoate

suppositions about the world to come. It was insufficient to cling to some antiseptic-sounding doctrines that had never been adequately examined. I needed to know for sure what happens when I close my eyes for the final time in this world.

The Evidence for Eternity

After recovering from my medical trauma, I decided to embark on a quest to get answers about the afterlife to satisfy my heart and soul. I traveled to South Bend, Indiana, and Portland, Oregon, to San Antonio, Denver, Chicago, and beyond as I sat down with scholars to quiz them about how they know what they know about this all-important matter.

I discussed heaven with them, but so much more. Can neuroscience tell us whether we have a soul that can survive our body's demise? Might the intriguing accounts of near-death experiences reveal something about our future? What insights can physics, history, and philosophy provide about our existence beyond this world? And what about Jesus, the one who was dead and gone but then reportedly was encountered alive a few days later? What light might he shed on the subject?

I wanted to know whether spending forever in a blissful paradise makes rational sense. And who gets to go to heaven anyway? Some Christians believe everyone wins a ticket to paradise—even our pet dogs. And how about the awful reality of that "other place"—wouldn't it be more humane for God to quickly extinguish people who are headed for hell rather than consigning them to an eternity of suffering? More and more pastors are saying so.

I also explored alternatives to the Christian worldview—for instance, reincarnation. Shouldn't we listen to people who say they've lived in the past? Maybe life *is* cyclical, as Eastern religions teach—birth and death followed by more of the same until

we're ultimately absorbed into The Absolute. Millions of people believe that's true.

Let's face it, there's a lot of controversy about life after death—and sometimes religious leaders aren't much help. When Union Theological Seminary president Serene Jones was asked by a reporter what happens when we die, her first words were, "I don't know! There may be something, there may be nothing."[1]

Ask a cross section of Americans the same question, and one out of six will shrug their shoulders. They have no idea what occurs after death. Only a slim majority (54 percent) believe they'll end up in heaven.[2]

As for atheists, I suspect many of them think about death more frequently than some of them admit. At least, I did when I was a spiritual skeptic, staring at the ceiling in the middle of the night and shuddering at the prospect of my ultimate demise.

"For me, the fear of death is far and away the most immediate and challenging aspect of my atheism," one humanist told *The Atlantic*. "Death affects me in a profound way."[3] Even Bart Ehrman, the agnostic New Testament scholar, once conceded, "The fear of death gripped me for years, and there are still moments when I wake up at night in a cold sweat."[4]

Many people get to the closing moments of their life—often a time of angst and abject fear—without any certainty about what to expect next. One author tells of asking a thirty-one-year-old friend who was on his deathbed what dying was like. "I don't know," the man replied. "I don't really know. Sometimes it seems like some blackness coming toward me. And sometimes it doesn't feel like anything."[5]

That's not poetic, but it's honest. He sincerely had no idea what would transpire in those fateful moments to come. What is hidden inside that ominous approaching darkness? Will he feel anything after he breathes his last?

Truly, what's more important than answers to questions like

these? Wouldn't you rather investigate these issues now instead of being tormented by them on your deathbed? Think about how your life might change today—your priorities, decisions, and worldview—once you ascertain with confidence what awaits you at the conclusion of your time in this world. After all, if there really is an afterlife, you'll be spending a lot more time there than here.

So come with me on the path of discovery. Consider the evidence. Evaluate the logic. Pursue the truth with an open mind. Then reach your own informed verdict in the case for heaven.

CHAPTER 1

The Quest for Immortality

Our Frantic Efforts to Outlive Ourselves

How can I rest, how can I be at peace? Despair is in my heart . . . I am afraid of death.

EPIC OF GILGAMESH (CIRCA 2100 BC),
OLDEST KNOWN FICTION

No deity will save us; we must save ourselves.

HUMANIST MANIFESTO II

It was a sermon on heaven and hell by famed evangelist Billy Graham that brought a troubled twelve-year-old named Clay Jones to faith in Jesus. The son of an atheist and astrologer, he had grown up sickly and bullied, a mediocre student and a self-described "rebellious little punk." Graham's 1969 rally in Southern California became the turning point for him.

Over time, Jones was utterly transformed. He married his high school sweetheart Jean E. and ended up as a pastor and seminary professor. Then came the phone call that rocked his world—specialists had finally diagnosed his chronic back pain. The news was grim: he was suffering from a virulent form of bone cancer that kills 100 percent of its victims within two years.

Hit the pause button. Can you imagine getting a call like

that? How would you react? What emotions would surge through you? What's the first thing you would do?

As for Clay and Jean E., tears streamed down their faces. They held hands and offered a prayer of thanksgiving for what God had done in their lives and for the fact that he was in control of the situation. They asked for healing.

"This is going to sound strange," Jones said later, "but I wasn't afraid of dying. Some people scoff when I say that, but it's true. Yes, I mourned that I'd be leaving my wife. But, you see, I had a robust view of heaven—and *that's* what made all the difference. As the apostle Paul said, 'To live is Christ and to die is gain.'[1] The worst thing that could happen would be that I would graduate into God's glorious presence—forever."

How someone reacts to life-shattering news like that depends on their worldview. If there is no God, there is no hope. Said Stanford psychiatrist Irvin D. Yalom, "Despite the staunchest, most venerable defenses, we can never completely subdue death anxiety: it is always there, lurking in some hidden ravine of the mind."[2] Indeed, the desire to cheat death and live forever, to somehow achieve immortality apart from God, has been a driving force throughout history.

As for Jones, a few weeks after that initial call, a specialist realized there had been an error in the diagnosis—yes, he had bone cancer, but it was a much milder form that could be treated by surgery. Today, Jones has been healed for more than fifteen years.

Still, his own health scare, his chronic childhood illnesses, and the deaths of friends have given Jones special insights into the topic of dying.

I flew to Orange County, California, and drove to his modest Mediterranean-style house to chat with him about his latest book, a profound and provocative work whose title explains exactly what I wanted to discuss with him: *Immortal: How the Fear of Death Drives Us and What We Can Do about It*.[3]

Interview #1: Clay Butler Jones, DMin

Jones has a multifaceted background as a leader, author, and professor. After receiving an undergraduate degree in philosophy from California State University in Fullerton, he went on to earn his Master of Divinity degree from American Christian Theological Seminary and his Doctor of Ministry degree from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

He is widely known for his work in the apologetics program at Biola University, where he started teaching in 2004. He has taught classes on the resurrection, why God allows evil, and other topics as an associate professor at its Talbot Seminary, and he is currently a visiting scholar there.

Along the way, he hosted a national call-in talk radio program for eight years, sparring with Buddhists, Scientologists, secular humanists, Muslims, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and others from varying religious perspectives. Currently he serves as chairman of the board of Ratio Christi, a ministry that defends Christianity on more than 115 college campuses.

His 2017 book *Why Does God Allow Evil?* is a masterful treatment of a troubling topic. Philosopher J. P. Moreland said Jones "fearlessly and deftly addresses all the hard questions head-on," adding, "There is no ducking of issues."[4] Apologist Frank Turek said Jones's new book on immortality, published in 2020, "could be one of the most important books you'll ever read."[5]

We sat down in adjacent cushioned chairs in Jones's living room for our conversation. Jones is an all-too-rare combination of being an unvarnished straight shooter with a heart full of compassion and empathy. There is, to echo Moreland, no ducking of issues with him.

He was casual in his attire, unpretentious in his demeanor, and passionate in his convictions. Though over sixty years old,

his hair was still pretty much black (and slightly tousled), while gray was on the verge of fully conquering his beard.

Our conversation stretched into several hours as we delved into the issue of how the fear of death drives humanity, and how the desire to achieve immortality—of *any* sort—is a relentless pursuit for so many people.

"What prompted you to research this topic?" I asked.

"I came across the book *A Brief History of Thought*, by French philosopher and secular humanist Luc Ferry," Jones explained. "Ferry wrote, 'The quest for a salvation without God is at the heart of every great philosophical system, and that is its essential and ultimate objective.'[6] That rocked me! He was saying that the heart of philosophy is trying to find a way of dealing with death without God. I needed to find out if other philosophers felt the same way."

"What did you discover?"

"That indeed much of philosophy is trying to conquer the fear of death. For example, Plato writes that in the last hours before his teacher Socrates died, Socrates said, 'Truly then . . . those who practise philosophy aright are cultivating dying.'[7] Philosopher Michel de Montaigne wrote an essay called 'To Philosophize Is to Learn How to Die,' in which he said that all the wisdom in the world eventually comes down to teaching us how not to be afraid of dying.[8] German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer said, 'Without death men would scarcely philosophize.'[9]

"So philosophers, anthropologists, psychologists, sociologists, psychiatrists—they're fascinated with how death affects behavior," he continued. "Cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker's book *The Denial of Death* won the Pulitzer Prize in 1974.[10] Becker says that 'the idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else: it is a mainspring of human activity.'[11] His premise was that everybody is terrified by their own death and they're trying to do everything they can to compensate for it."

"How did your friends react when they found out you were writing a book on death?" I asked.

Jones chuckled. "They'd say, quite defensively, 'I'm not afraid of dying.'"

"Were they telling the truth?"

"They weren't being entirely dishonest—because they don't think about their own death. They've blocked it from their minds."

"Until they have chest pains," I offered.

He pointed at me like I'd won the jackpot. "Bingo," he declared. "Then the fear of death stands in front of them—and it won't leave the room."

Denial, Distraction, Depression

In his book, Clay Jones quotes social scientists as saying that the fear of death drives culture—in fact, some claim it fuels *all* of it. As social theorist Zygmunt Bauman wrote, "There would probably be no culture were humans unaware of their mortality."[12]

"Are these experts exaggerating?" I asked.

"Just barely," came his response. "Remember that Hebrews 2:15 says Jesus came to rescue people who are 'held in slavery by their fear of death.' So Scripture confirms that we are in bondage to a fear of dying. And I do believe that is what motivates much of human behavior. If people don't follow Jesus, who's going to free them from that slavery? They've got to somehow find a way to free themselves—and that leads to all kinds of problems."

"For example?"

"It affects people in every conceivable way. The first thing they do is deny. They shove it out of their minds and say to themselves, 'I'm the exception. If science keeps advancing and I live long enough, medicine will cure anything that threatens my life.' Then they distract. We pay entertainers and sports stars huge amounts of money because they're valuable to us—they divert our attention from the fact that we're going to die.

"Then there's depression," he added. "The prospect of our death and the deaths of those we love is *the* major reason for depression. Staks Rosch said in the *Huffington Post*, 'Depression is a serious problem in the greater atheist community and far too often, that depression has led to suicide. This is something many of my fellow atheists often don't like to admit, but it is true.'"[13]

"I can understand depression, but suicide?" I asked. "People kill themselves because they're afraid of dying? That's counterintuitive."

"Essentially, what they're doing is taking control of that which has control over them. The Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno said that 'the self-slayer kills himself because he will not wait for death.'"[14]

In his book, Jones quotes research published in the *American Journal of Psychiatry*: "Religiously unaffiliated subjects had significantly more lifetime suicide attempts and more first-degree relatives who committed suicide than subjects who endorsed a religious affiliation . . . Furthermore, subjects with no religious affiliation perceived fewer reasons for living."[15]

Since my interview with Jones, Harvard researchers released a new study documenting that attendance at religious services dramatically reduces deaths from suicide, drugs, and alcohol. Attending services at least once a week cut these so-called "deaths by despair" by 33 percent among men and a whopping 68 percent among women, compared to those who never attended services.[16]

"People often talk about an epidemic of suicide," concluded Jones, "but the real epidemic is the increasing rejection of a robust belief in an afterlife. *That's* what is miring more and more people in hopelessness."

Crack-Crack-Cracking the Brain

I picked up my Bible and quoted Ecclesiastes 3:11, which says God has "set eternity in the human heart," and then I asked Jones, "What does that mean to you?"

"That there's more than just a fear of death. We want to live forever. It's implanted in us. We want to understand eternity, we want to fit into eternity, we *need* eternity," he replied.

I said, "One way that people try to achieve immortality without God is to figure out how to live longer and longer in order to cheat death. Futurologist Ian Pearson said that 'realistically by 2050 we would expect to be able to download your mind into a machine, so when you die it's not a major career problem.'[17] What do you make of that?"

Jones sighed. "There's a lot of desperation along those lines—you can see it in organic grocery stores, where shoppers scurry around to make sure everything is non-GMO, no antibiotics, and so forth, as if this can significantly prolong their life. I was at a reunion where people were passing around a book on how not to die. I said, 'By the way, if scientists were able to cure all cancers, people would only live an average of 2.265 years longer.' A Harvard demographer computed this. It doesn't matter—you'll die of something else."

"What about transhumanism?" I asked, referring to the way scientists want to alter our bodies and brains scientifically so we can live longer. Billionaire innovator Elon Musk is already experimenting with implanting computer chips into brains.[18]

"Sure, transhumanism, or human+, says that since people are no more than molecules in motion, we can replicate the synapses of the brain with circuitry not yet invented. And they can upload our mind into a computer so we can be avatars in a virtual world or transferred into a robot. Of course it's science fiction."

"Why?"

"You'd have to have circuitry that's identical to the connections in your brain. There are almost a thousand trillion connections in the brain, and we haven't figured out all its secrets yet. As one expert explained, emulating the brain on a computer isn't the same as actually making a brain. Besides, they haven't

been able to reproduce the brain of a small roundworm with 302 neurons. Another expert said that even if artificial intelligence does 99 percent of the work, it would take a thousand years to map the brain.

"On top of that," he said, "even if we could produce something that's wired exactly like your brain, nobody has any idea how such a system could be conscious. Let's face it—scientists can't explain how nonconscious stuff becomes conscious. Even Michael Shermer of *Skeptic* magazine says, 'We still don't know the basis of consciousness.'[19] You're more than just your brain—your consciousness is the real *you* that provides your identity. So this is just a pipe dream."

I asked Jones about cryonics, which involves freezing a person after they die and then thawing them out once science has found a cure for what killed them. Theoretically, someone could continue this process ad infinitum. As an example, the head and body of Hall of Fame baseball player Ted Williams, who died in 2002, are frozen in separate tanks of liquid nitrogen. His daughter said cryonics is "like a religion, something we could have faith in."[20]

Numerous celebrities have said they want this ultimate ice bath for themselves when they die, including broadcaster Larry King, who didn't believe in an afterlife, and so he said, "The only hope, the only fragment of hope, is to be frozen."[21]

"This is replete with problems," Jones told me. "For one thing, you have to be frozen within a couple of minutes of dying or else your brain deteriorates. That's not very practical. Second, there's sonic fracturing."

"What's that?"

Jones reached over and poured more soda over the ice cubes in my half-empty glass, and then he paused. "Hear the cracking?"

Sure enough, the ice was making a cracking sound.

"That's what happens if you try to thaw a brain or organ—*crack, crack, crack*," he said. "Nobody knows how to fix that

fracturing. One cryonics company actually suggests the possibility of sewing or gluing parts back together. Seriously? Now you've got Frankenstein!"

"Why do all these schemes for immortality fail?"

"Because God has determined that people are going to die. Hebrews 9:27 says that 'people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment.' Adam and Eve decided to follow their hearts and violate the command of God, and we've been attending funerals ever since. You *will* die. The big question, then, becomes how to make sure you spend eternity with God."

Living On through Children

One of the most fascinating insights in Jones's book is that much of human behavior is motivated by people pursuing various forms of *symbolic immortality*—in other words, since they can't physically live forever, they doggedly pursue ways to leave a legacy or make an impact on the world so that at least their memory will be kept alive in perpetuity.

Philosopher Sam Keen said people try to "transcend death by participating in something of lasting worth. We achieve ersatz immortality by sacrificing ourselves to conquer an empire, to build a temple, to write a book, to establish a family, to accumulate a fortune, to further progress and prosperity, to create an information society and a global free market."[22]

One promoter of this strategy was Edwin S. Shneidman, the first professor of the study of death at UCLA. "A positive postself is a most worthy goal of life," he said. "To live beyond one's own breath! To be lauded in the obituary pages of the *New York Times*. To have a future in the world yet to come; to have a gossamer extension beyond the date of one's death. To escape oblivionation; to survive one's self is a lofty and reasonable aspiration." He went on to add, "To cease as though one had never been, to exit life with no hope of living on in the memory of another, to be

expunged from history's record—that is a fate literally far worse than death."[23]

Really? *Literally* far worse than death? That's quite a statement. I turned to Jones. "What are some of the most common forms of symbolic immortality that people pursue?"

"Having or adopting children is a big one—trying to live on through your kids," he answered. "Nathan Heflick was explicit in *Psychology Today*: 'So why do people have children? One reason is to transcend the great specter of death.'[24] The great actor Sir Peter Ustinov said, 'Children are the only form of immortality that we can be sure of.'"[25]

"Why doesn't that work?" I asked.

"Just do the math. Our genetics quickly get watered down. In twenty generations, your future offspring will only have 0.000004 percent of your genes. You couldn't feed a mosquito with that. Actually, given the way genes are transferred in blocks, with some dominant and others recessive, it's unlikely *any* of your genes will survive that long."

"What about memories that are carried on through families?"

Jones smiled. "Do you know the first names of your great-great-grandparents?"

I felt sheepish. "Uh, no, I guess I don't."

He reassured me with a pat on my shoulder. "Don't feel bad," he said. "I'll often ask classrooms full of students if they know the first names of their great-great-grandparents—and so far only one student has said yes. Then I ask if anyone *cares* about their great-great-grandparents, and the answer is no. Not one person. *Nobody cares!* So much for trying to keep yourself alive through your family."

Jones added that he's seeing a growing trend of people engaging in genealogy research. "That's another way of trying to live forever—if you venerate your ancestors, then your kids or grandkids might feel obligated to remember you. It's fruitless, because *you're still dead!*" he said, his bushy eyebrows rising. "Even if you

live on briefly in the memory of family members, it doesn't really give you authentic immortality."

Fifteen Minutes of Fame

In his book, Clay Jones quotes an exchange between atheist Richard Wade and a spiritual skeptic named Anne, who wrote to say that her fear of death was causing her such severe panic attacks that she would almost pass out.

Wade's response was that he wasn't bothered by thoughts of dying because "my legacy is already complete . . . I've made a positive difference by being here, and I'm looking forward to making even more."[26]

Jones said to me, "Essentially, Wade was telling this woman to go accomplish some things before you die so that you'll be remembered. That's another form of symbolic immortality—creating something that supposedly has lasting value."

"How common is that?"

"Very," he said. "It's what causes people to paint a masterpiece, design a building, start a website, or write a book," he said, cracking a smile as he gestured toward me.

He went on to cite some examples. "Michelangelo supposedly said, 'No thought is born in me that has not "death" engraved upon it.'[27] One of the most extravagant odes to self is the Palace of Versailles in France—the world's largest palace, with more than 720,000 square feet, over 2,000 acres—all created by King Louis XIV to secure his name in history. He told the *Academie Royale*, 'I entrust to you the most precious thing on earth, my fame.'[28] Or these days, if you're wealthy enough, you can just put your name on a building—although that doesn't always turn out well."

"What do you mean?"

"When the Lincoln Center for Performing Arts opened in New York in the 1960s, its concert auditorium was called Philharmonic Hall. A few years later, they solicited a large gift

to improve the acoustics and named the hall after Avery Fisher, who manufactured speakers. Then in 2015 they redid the hall again, and this time they renamed it David Geffen Hall, after a media mogul who bought the naming rights from the Avery Fisher family. Apparently, Fisher's progeny didn't care much for the idea of his symbolic immortality. As you can see, this kind of fame can be rather fleeting."[29]

"We live in such a celebrity culture," I said. "So many people are striving for fame to give them a kind of symbolic immortality."

"Absolutely—and it gets a little ridiculous, like the guy who made it into the *Guinness Book of World Records* by breaking the greatest number of toilet seats with his head in one minute."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah—forty-six in total. I don't know where he even got the idea to do that in the first place. Now he's made it into the book—until the day when he gets forced out by other bizarre accomplishments. I remember when the mayor of a city announced his long-shot bid for the presidency. One political commentator said he had zero chance, but at least it will be in his obituary. I guess it was worth it to him for that."

Then Jones added an ironic example of how this quest for fame seldom succeeds in the long term. "Remember how the artist Andy Warhol said everyone will be famous for fifteen minutes?" I nodded. "Well, in 2004, a TV commercial said, 'Somebody once said everyone will be famous for fifteen minutes.' They actually removed his name! Even *that* fame didn't last for him."

Stealing John Lennon's Fame

Then there's the dark side of symbolic immortality. Some people are driven to leave their mark on the world, even if it means achieving infamy through crime or mayhem. As one serial killer wrote to a television station before he was caught, "How many do I have to kill before I get . . . some national attention?"[30]

With that, Jones related the story of the temple of Artemis in Ephesus—considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It took 120 years to build—and then one day in the year 356 BC, someone burned it to the ground. They caught him and asked why he did it—and he said he wanted to be famous.

"Their response was to declare that his name would be forever banned—a so-called *damnatio memoriae* law that said anyone mentioning his name would be executed," Jones said. "They wanted to scrub him from history, but guess what? Today we know his name. It's Herostratus. Books and plays have been written about him. And yet we hardly know anything about the architects of the temple. Their names, for the most part, are lost.

"Why did Mark David Chapman kill John Lennon?" Jones asked. "Chapman was straightforward: he said he did it to get attention and to 'steal John Lennon's fame.'[31] He told the parole board, 'That bright light of fame, of infamy, notoriety was there. I couldn't resist it.'[32] When the Charles Lindbergh baby was kidnapped, more than two hundred people falsely confessed to the crime.[33] That illustrates the desire for attention—even bad attention.

"Tragically, we see this far too often," he said. "The Parkland school shooter, who murdered seventeen people, recorded a video prior to his crime in which he said, 'When you see me on the news you'll all know who I am.'[34] The Columbine High School killers speculated beforehand which famous director would create a movie about them. For people like them, there is no God, there is no judgment or afterlife. Why not go out in a blaze of glory and make a name for yourself?"

I shuddered at the truth of that. "In the end, all these various forms of symbolic immortality are absolutely futile, aren't they?"

"That's right. After all, they're *symbolic*—you're still dead, right? Ultimately nothing meaningful is achieved. The Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius put it well when he said, 'What is the

advantage of having one's own name on the lips of future generations when their overriding concern will be the same as ours: to have their names on the lips of successors . . . How does that confer any reality on us?"[35]

"Let's face it: notoriety generally fades pretty quickly. Most perpetrators of crimes are forgotten. Our accomplishments get eclipsed because of greater accomplishments by others. The vast majority of people who spend their lives desperately trying to achieve stardom fail in their quest. Those who do manage to achieve a degree of celebrity status find that maintaining their fame takes endless maintenance, fine-tuning, and damage control."

He added with a smile, "Just ask Madonna!"

Of Books and Chocolate Cake

Faced with the abject failure of various attempts to achieve immortality apart from God, many atheists have taken another approach to dealing with the fear of death. Maybe, they say, dying isn't so bad after all. Perhaps it's actually *better* than the idea of immortality. Maybe the grave is a blessing in disguise.

"They try to paper over the fear of death by maintaining that they wouldn't want to live forever anyway," Jones said to me. "They claim that eternal life would be supremely boring. We'd run out of pleasurable things to do. The endless repetition would be tedious and eventually drive us crazy."

From time to time, atheists have brought up that argument in conversations with me. It's a position reflected in a quote popularly attributed to science fiction author Isaac Asimov: "Whatever the tortures of hell, I think the boredom of heaven would be even worse."[36]

"Of course, it's a straw man argument," said Jones. "Atheist Stephen Fry said eating a delicious cake or reading a good book are great pleasures because they end. But he added, 'A book that

went on forever and a cake that you never stopped eating would both soon lose their appeal.'"[37]

Jones threw up his hands. "Who in the world is talking about endless repetition?" he asked. "We could eat chocolate cake every day right now and get bored with it, but we don't. We vary our diet, and the cake becomes a periodic treat. Nobody's talking about eating the same cake, nonstop forever. And whoever heard of an endless book? All great books have a climax and conclusion—but we don't keep reading the same book over and over.

"Besides," he said, "if heaven is real, then God will make all things new,[38] and he will be continually creating a world of joy and wonder for us. If God can create all the beauty and excitement of our current universe, he's certainly capable of creating an eternally stimulating and rewarding experience for his followers in the new heaven and the new earth."

A Bible verse that says as much popped into my mind: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined what God has prepared for those who love him."[39]

Jones added that another approach atheists take to minimize death is to say that dying is good because it clears the way for others to live. The late Apple cofounder Steve Jobs actually said in a commencement address that "death is very likely the single best invention of life" because "it clears out the old to make way for the new."[40]

Asked Jones, "Even if it were true that humanity's lifeboat is so full that someone needs to drown in the icy waters so others can survive, why should that be any comfort to us? But the truth is that this is irrelevant. That's not the situation we're in. Nobody needs to die today because we lack adequate resources."

"*I Was Not; I Was; I Am Not; I Do Not Care.*"

Yet another popular way of mitigating the fear of death goes back to the Greek philosopher Epicurus (341–270 BC), who essentially

asked why we should get worked up over dying because it's only the same kind of nonexistence we had before we were born. If your preexistence didn't bother you, why should you fear graduating into nonexistence after death? As Jones pointed out in *Immortal*, a popular Roman saying on ancient tombstones was "*Non fui, fui, non sum, non curo*," or "I was not; I was; I am not; I do not care."[41]

"The gospel of atheism is . . . that nothing happens after death," atheist Sam Harris told a crowd of skeptics. "There's nothing to worry about, there's nothing to fear, when after you die you are returned to that nothingness that you were before you were born . . . Death, therefore, is not a problem. Life is the problem."[42]

"How do you respond to that argument?" I asked Jones.

"As the philosopher Thomas Nagel said, it's not the state of nonexistence that's objectionable, but the loss of life," he answered. "What if you were told you would soon be reduced to the mental capacity of a contented baby and you'd be happy as long as your stomach was full and your diaper was dry? After all, you were once content as an infant, so wouldn't you be content now? Frankly, I don't think that would comfort anyone. The problem is what you're deprived of. As Nagel said, if life is all we have, then losing it would be 'the greatest loss we can sustain.'"[43]

I spoke up. "Of course, the premise that there is nothingness after death presumes Christianity must be false."

"Exactly right," came Jones's reply. "If Christianity is true—and we have good reasons to believe it is—then we face judgment after death. There would be eternal consequences for those who have rejected God's offer of forgiveness for their sins. We don't face the nothingness of nonexistence; instead, we either face an eternity with God or separated from him. That's the *real* truth about immortality.

"Let's face it," he added, "skeptics like to claim that Christians invented Christianity to escape their fear of death, but look at all the nonsense skeptics need to embrace to cope with their own

death fears. It's all pointless. As a physician wrote in *Psychology Today*, 'I've tried to resolve my fear of death intellectually and come to the conclusion that it can't be done, at least by me.'"[44]

In his book, Jones sums up the atheistic story of salvation without God this way: "When you die, your consciousness will cease. Your body will then decay where, as *The Hearse Song* goes, 'The worms crawl in, the worms crawl out / the worms play pinochle on your snout.' You have no hope of reuniting with loved ones. You will never again enjoy other people, or sunsets, or beaches, or breakers, or mountains, or redwoods, or roses, or anything else for that matter. Soon *everyone will forget you* except as maybe a footnote of history. But even if you are a footnote of history, does that really matter?"[45]

Christianity, in contrast, offers the best possible outcome for followers of Christ after they pass from this world. Reveling in God's presence. Reuniting with loved ones. Living without tears or struggles or fears. Experiencing a wondrous world of adventure, excitement, and exploration. Contentment, joy, love—*forever.*

It's no wonder that even the atheist philosopher Luc Ferry concedes, "I grant you that amongst the available doctrines of salvation, nothing can compete with Christianity—provided, that is, that you are a believer."[46]

And I would add, provided that our beliefs are justified by the evidence.

The *Most Important Topic*

Jones had made it clear that when it comes to dealing with our inevitable death, there is really no room for false hope, wishful thinking, desperate denials, or empty efforts to somehow achieve pseudo-immortality apart from God. On the one hand, if heaven is really just "a fairy story for people afraid of the dark," as the late theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking put it,[47] we shouldn't want anything to do with the concept.

On the other hand, if Oxford professor John Lennox is right when he says that "atheism is a fairy story for people afraid of the light"[48]—that there are legitimate reasons to believe that our death in this world can be an actual gateway to a more fabulous existence for eternity—then this is surely *the* most important topic we can ponder. This life, as precious as it is to us, is just a blink of an eye compared to staring down the infinite timeline of eternity.

Jones and I sipped the last of our soft drinks and stood just as his wife, Jean E., walked into the room. Jones introduced us and then said, "How about if we go out for lunch?"

He didn't need to twist my arm. I was looking forward to a casual meal and some light conversation before continuing to climb the mountain of research that faced me.

In the end, what Clay Jones said about our universal desire for immortality sounded accurate to me. But that doesn't make the Christian view of the afterlife true. I still needed to pursue the issue of whether surviving the death of our bodies makes any scientific sense. Logically speaking, wouldn't this require that we have a soul that can continue to endure after we take our last breath in this world? I needed to know whether there is any compelling evidence that people possess this kind of immaterial spirit.

Recently I had heard about a Cambridge-educated neuroscientist who might be able to provide solid answers. Though she lives all the way over in England, fortunately technology would enable us to connect for an in-depth interview.

I was determined to emulate the example of Jones: there would be, I resolved, no ducking of issues.