

# 90 Minutes in Heaven Study Guide

## 90 Minutes in Heaven by Don Piper

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# Plot Summary

Don Piper dies in a horrific car accident. Ninety minutes after his death, Don Piper begins singing "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" inside his crushed car. In what can only be termed an amazing miracle fueled by intense faith, Don Piper dies and then lives again after spending ninety minutes at heaven's gate. For the rest of his life, Don will try to come to terms with why he was allowed to experience the comfort of heaven only to be sent back to earth, a mangled version of his former self.

Don's Ford Focus is struck by a semi-truck while crossing a bridge. The impact sends Don's car into the side of the bridge, crushing him inside. Don's left leg is shattered in two places and missing four inches of bone. His right arm is dislocated and flung over the back of the driver's seat barely attached to his body. Don is covered in glass shards and loses most of the blood in his body. Surprisingly, Don suffers no internal or head injuries. As the result of his injuries, Don spends nearly a year in the hospital and many more months at home lying in a hospital bed. Don's left leg is placed in an experimental device known as the Ilizarov frame. This frame stretches Don's leg bones in order to replace most of the missing portion. Don suffers chronic pain for the rest of his life and cannot engage in many of the activities he formerly enjoyed.

Don is a minister and his strong faith is both a source of strength and frustration during his long recovery. During the ninety minutes that Don is dead, he experiences the awe of viewing heaven. Don does not feel sadness as a result of leaving his wife and three children behind. His faith secures him in the knowledge that someday they will join him in heaven and that God will continue to provide for his family on earth. Don is enveloped by brilliant light and melodious music. He feels comfortable and warm, ready to step through the gate and see the face of God. Don never sees God because he is suddenly sent back to earth.

On earth, Don battles severe depression, constant pain and continually questions why he was sent back. Although Don's faith never wavers throughout his arduous return to health, he does wonder about the fairness of being allowed to glimpse the glory of heaven before being sent back to a life that will never be normal again. It takes thousands of people praying for Don and several close friends confronting Don about his depression and bad attitude before he begins to come to terms with the whole situation. Don eventually reaches out to other people in pain and soon becomes a role model for others being treated with the Ilizarov frame. His message of the beauty of heaven inspires many, comforts others and brings more than a few people to know the Lord. As Don's physical recovery progresses, so does his emotional and spiritual recovery. Don learns to accept help when offered and to appreciate the small accomplishments in life.



# Prologue and Chapter One: The Accident

## Prologue and Chapter One: The Accident Summary and Analysis

On January 18, 1989, Don Piper dies in a car accident. Paramedics pronounce Piper dead at the scene and proceed to work on other victims for ninety minutes. During that time, Piper goes to heaven, while a Baptist preacher prays for his survival. God answers those prayers and Don returns to earth and to life.

Don Piper attends a conference for the Baptist General Convention of Texas at Trinity Pines. The conference is focused on starting new churches, which is an idea Don has been considering. The conference draws to a close Wednesday morning and the weather has turned cold and rainy. As Don prepares to leave Trinity Pines, he decides to take I-45, also called the Gulf Highway, home instead of Highway 59, which he drove to the conference. Because of a traffic ticket on his trip to the conference, Don buckles his seatbelt, which he does not usually do. The Gulf Highway parallels and then crosses Lake Livingston. As it crosses the lake the road narrows and has no shoulders. The road ends in a bridge that originally spanned the Trinity River, followed by a sharp rise that reduces visibility.

Just as Don's small Ford Escort reaches the end of the bridge, an eighteen-wheel truck crosses the center line, hitting Don head on and pinning the car against the bridge railing. The truck strikes two other cars before coming to a stop at the other end of the bridge. The truck is driven by an inmate from the Texas Department of Corrections, who is transporting food to the prison. The inmate is not licensed to drive a semi-truck but was given the duty because he was the only volunteer. The driver is given a citation but is otherwise unharmed. The drivers of the other two cars involved suffer minor cuts and bruises. Don is declared dead as soon as paramedics arrive on the scene, and his car is covered by a tarp as they move on to aid others.

The beginning of the story seems like it should be the end. What more could be said about a man who dies on impact in a freak car accident? However, Don Piper's story is much more fantastic than the reader could imagine. The accident acts as a catalyst for the rest of the story. Although Don spends a great deal of time wondering why such a thing was allowed to happen to him, the reader may question what Don's life would have been like if the accident had never occurred.



# Chapter Two: My Time in Heaven and Chapter Three: Heavenly Music

## Chapter Two: My Time in Heaven and Chapter Three: Heavenly Music Summary and Analysis

Don does not experience the sensation of being drawn towards the light through a dark tunnel that is often portrayed when someone dies. Instead, at the moment the truck impacted the car, he finds himself standing in heaven surrounded by an brilliant light. A large crowd of people stands before a large, ornate gate. The crowd moves toward Don, and he begins to recognize people he knows. The first person he sees is his grandfather, Joe Kulbeth. Joe embraces Don with a strong hug as Don remembers riding in an ambulance with his Grandfather and then receiving the news that Joe had died. Many others crowd in to embrace and welcome Joe. A childhood friend killed in a car accident greets him, Don's great-grandfather appears, as does his great-grandmother and several school teachers. Don realizes that each of these people have played a role in his own Christian walk or influenced his life strongly.

The welcoming committee seems to go on forever. Don is reminded of family reunions with his father's family of eleven brothers and sisters and all the cousins. Don's senses are heightened as he drinks in the sights and sounds of heaven. He is completely happy and has no sense of loss for things left on earth. Don does not feel saddened by his sudden removal from his earthly family. God has removed all concept of negativity or worry and replaced those feelings with warmth and joy. Don looks around at all the people noticing that they all appear the same as when he last saw them on earth, except now they are perfect. Illness and physical ailments have been washed away.

Don is finally able to pull his gaze away from the people surrounding him and take in the rest of heaven. A brilliant radiance emanates around him. As Don moves closer to the gates of heaven, he becomes aware of the music all around. The first sound he hears is the whisper of angel wings beating the air. Don cannot see the wings, but the sound they make reminds him of a group of birds taking flight at the same time. The next sound Don hears is the multitude of voices singing different songs all together. Some voices sing modern songs, while others intone ancient chants. Although all the voices are singing at the same time, the result is melodious rather than discordant. All the songs praise God. This sound is the one memory that constantly returns to Don back on earth.

Don does not actually see God, although he senses that God is there. Don suspects that if he had actually seen God face-to-face, he would not have returned to earth. As Don and the welcoming committee of friends and family near the gate, Don notices that the people move from in front of him to beside him. Don realizes that they are moving in order to usher him into heaven proper. A few steps away from the gate, Don is whisked out of heaven and back to earth.



As Don describes heaven, the reader relaxes and time comes to a standstill. The reader begins to wonder about who will comprise his own heavenly welcoming committee. Because Don's account of heaven does not involve tunnels followed by bright lights, there is an air of credibility to his story. The reader tends to believe Don Piper's account of heaven more than other near death experience stories.

The reader cannot help feeling peaceful while reading about heaven from Don's perspective. It is comforting to know that all our loved ones are gathered together as one big family. The reader also relishes the idea that everyone is restored to perfect health without becoming unrecognizable. The heavenly music infuses Don's story, and is so real that the reader can well imagine the beauty surrounding Don. The thought of thousands of people joined in worshipful praise mirrors the brilliant light radiating through heaven. When Don is suddenly transported out of heaven, the reader is just as disappointed as Don.



# Chapter Four: From Heaven to Earth and Chapter Five: Earth to Hospital

## Chapter Four: From Heaven to Earth and Chapter Five: Earth to Hospital Summary and Analysis

Don's accident occurred at 11:45 A.M. Since the accident involved a truck from the state prison, the guards radioed for immediate help. EMTs arrived on the scene shortly after the collision and pronounce Don dead before moving on to the other victims. After tending to the other two people involved in the crash, the EMTs return to Don and check one final time for a pulse. Don is still dead. Three ambulances arrived at the scene, but only one remains and it is getting ready to leave empty. A justice of the peace has been called to officially pronounce Don dead, so that the body can be moved in an unmarked vehicle rather than an ambulance. The EMTs are not in a rush to move Don's body but are working to move debris so traffic can begin moving again.

Dick Onerecker and his wife, Anita, were also in attendance at the conference and left Trinity Pines minutes before Don. Dick and Anita stopped at a bait shop to get coffee before driving over the bridge spanning Lake Livingston. Don passes the Onerecker's while they are purchasing coffee. Dick and Anita soon find themselves stuck in the backed-up traffic, waiting to get across the bridge so decide to walk up to the accident to lend assistance. Dick is told by one of the EMTs that the gentleman in the red car is deceased and the other two people involved are unhurt. Obeying a prompt from God, Dick asks the EMT if he can go pray for the dead man. The EMT tries to dissuade Dick but eventually let him go to the car.

Dick crawls through the trunk and stretches across the backseat in order to lay a hand on Don's shoulder. Dick then begins to pray, specifically that the dead man will have no internal injuries. After praying for awhile, Dick begins to sing "What a Friend We Have in Jesus." Don finds himself singing along with the multitude in heaven, and then he is singing with Dick. Dick Onerecker makes record time extricating himself from the mangled car and racing to tell the EMT that the man, who has been dead for ninety minutes is singing. The EMTs rush to check Don's pulse and find him awake.

Everything switches into high gear when Don is found conscious. The Jaws of Life are ordered to come as quickly as possible because Don cannot be removed from the car without them. The truck struck the car in a way that Don is now pinned between the dashboard and the seat. His left leg is shattered in two places and is missing four inches of bone. His left arm is dislocated and hanging over the back seat and is only attached by a small bit of flesh. Don's face is covered in glass shards, and he has lost nearly all the blood in his body.

Once Don is extricated from the car, he is transported to a nearby hospital, which turns him away citing lack of equipment to care for such severe trauma. The next hospital



accepts Don but works to have him moved immediately to a trauma center that can provide better care. The weather is not good enough for the Life Star flight to transport Don, so he must endure the eighty-mile trip in the back of the ambulance. Don is met at Herman Hospital by his wife Eva. His church family notifies her of the accident and make sure that she is taken to the hospital, while members take care of the Piper's three children. An MRI reveals that Don has no internal injuries - exactly for what Dick Onerecker prayed.

Perhaps more astounding than the actual accident are the events immediately following it. Although Dick and Don properly met at the conference, Dick has no idea that Don is the deceased man in the crumpled red car. Dick does not ask to pray for Don because he knows him but because God tells him to do so. Dick's obedience is a testament to his intense faith. Most people would have prayed for Don's soul to find a happy home in heaven, not that a dead man would have no internal injuries. In the face of such insurmountable odds, Dick's prayers seem futile and ridiculous. Dick must have had similar doubts given his shock at finding a dead man singing with him. The most astounding aspect of the entire situation is not even that Don came back to earth, but that Dick's prayers were answered, and Don suffers no internal injuries.

All the odds seem to be against Don. The positive aspect of Don's return to life is almost overshadowed by a series of negative events. Don is alive, but the remote location of the accident does not bode well for his continued survival. The reader waits anxiously for more good news all the while worrying that Don will not survive after all.





# Chapter Six: The Recovery Begins and Chapter Seven: Decisions and Challenges

## Chapter Six: The Recovery Begins and Chapter Seven: Decisions and Challenges Summary and Analysis

A few days after the accident, Don is able to reflect on a series of events that worked in his favor. Don considers these "coincidences" miracles. Don does not normally wear his seatbelt while driving, but a ticket received a few weeks earlier prompts him to buckle up as he leaves Trinity Pines. The semi truck crashes into Don's car on the bridge instead of the open highway over the lake. If the accident had occurred on the roadway, Don's car would have plunged into the lake below, since the road has no side barriers. In defiance to all medical explanations, Don has no internal or head injuries. When Don arrives at Hermann Hospital, Dr. Tom Grieder is on duty. Dr. Grieder is an expert in bizarre traumas and is able to save Don's mangled left leg.

Don's road to recovery and years after the accident, doctors are still discovering injuries. Don undergoes eleven hours of surgery to set his broken right leg, stabilize his left arm, which is missing two inches of bone, and place his left leg in traction. Don is placed in ICU, where every available spot is hooked up to a monitor or poked with a needle. Don does not get any sleep because the monitor that tracks his oxygen intake constantly goes off and his room is near the hospital's helicopter pad. Don lays in his bed and listens to the sounds of other patients moaning and screaming in pain, only to have the nurses tell him that the noises he hears are his own.

Six days after Don's accident, he is on the verge of death again as the result of double pneumonia. Eva contacts David Gentiles to come visit Don, since doctors have told her Don will most likely not make it through the night. David tells Don that he is forming an all-night prayer vigil to pray Don back to health. The next morning the pneumonia is gone, and doctors discover that a breathing tube was wrongly inserted into Don's stomach instead of his lungs. The next day, Eva signs the release papers for Don to undergo another surgery to have the Iliazrov frame placed on his left leg. Eva makes the decision on her own because Don is too heavily medicated to understand what is happening to him.

The Iliazrov frame was developed by a Russian doctor to help grow new bone. The frame uses a series of wires and rods to pull the bone apart in order to force it to grow and lengthen again. Every day, someone arrives to turn the knobs on Don's frame a millimeter at a time. For a year, Don carries the extra weight of the frame around. He receives stares wherever he goes. One of the most frustrating questions that never



receives a sufficient answer is, "How long will this take?" No one is able to tell Don a definite time frame for his recovery. As he lays in bed wishing to return to heaven, Don thinks about the power of prayer. People have been praying for him throughout the entire ordeal, and so far all of their prayers have been answered.

Don's faith allows him to view the accident in a more positive light. As he reflects on that day, he discovers several coincidences that he considers nothing short of miracles. Indeed, if all the small details had been changed in any way, Don would not have survived the accident. As Don recounts the coincidences that worked to save his life, it becomes clear that God intended for Don to live and fulfill a distinct purpose.

What God's purpose is for Don is difficult to discern as he lies in a depressive fog confined to a hospital bed. As much as Don wants to believe that God has brought him back to earth for a reason, he struggles to find understanding. He has lost all control over his life and must lie helplessly while others try to help him. Despair seems the only available emotion at this stage. Compounding the difficult situation, Don is hit with double pneumonia due to surgical complications. Simply by coming back from the dead, Don has overcome a great deal and it seems unfair that he must fight for his life in such a weakened state. The power of prayer once again comes to Don's aid as David organizes an all-night prayer vigil. In case the reader missed the message the first time, Don again illustrates the strength of answered prayer.



# Chapter Eight: Pain and Adjustments and Chapter Nine: Endless Adjustments

## Chapter Eight: Pain and Adjustments and Chapter Nine: Endless Adjustments Summary and Analysis

There is a constant flow of visitors in and out of Don's room. Don's pastoral instincts will not allow him to lie quietly while people are there, and he becomes extremely exhausted trying to engage the masses who come to support him. When Eva realizes the toll that the well-wishers are taking on her husband, she requests that the nursing staff limit the number of visitors each day. Although the number of people coming to Don's room slows down, he continues to suffer from depression. Several psychiatrists stop by Don's room and try to engage him in conversation about his emotional health. Don refuses to talk to any of the therapists because he does not know how to express his experience in heaven. Don worries that if he tells the truth, the doctors will think he is crazy.

Life in the hospital continues to progress. Don is losing weight rapidly, but he is unable to eat because nothing tastes good. He never sleeps unless he passes out from sheer exhaustion or pain. Several days a week, Don is wheeled out of his room for x-rays. Because of the large amount of metal holding Don together, trips to the x-ray room are exceptionally long as the team of technicians try to figure out the best way to take the pictures. Everyday, the nurses have to clean all the needle holes on Don's body with hydrogen peroxide. All of these strenuous activities leave Don in pain and exhausted.

In the midst of Don's pain and depression, he meets someone in the hospital going through a similar experience. Christy is a seventeen-year-old girl, who had elective Iliazrov surgery to lengthen on of her legs. Don and Christy never meet but send letters back and forth with the help of the nurses. While Don is happy to have someone who can understand his pain, the knowledge that Christy will eventually lead a normal life again sends Don into a deeper depression. One glimmer of hope in the monotony of Don's daily existence is that he does something the doctors said he would never do again. After six weeks in the hospital, Don begins therapy. The sessions are very short at first, but eventually Don is able to stand and take his first steps supported by aides.

Despite the large number of visitors who come to see Don in the hospital, he refuses to let anyone do anything for him. One day, Jay Perkins stops by to visit Don. Jay is a retired minister filling in for Don. Jay notices that Don never asks for help and challenges him to open up to the people who care about him. Jay tells Don that people are trying to love him in the only way they know how, but Don will not let them. Don's first request is for a magazine, and then he asks another visitor to bring him a strawberry milkshake. When he sees the excited faces of his helpers, Don realizes that he has been shutting people out of his life.



Although Don is surrounded by a large number of visitors, he is utterly alone. The cloud of depression that has settled over him will not dissipate and is made larger by his inability to share his feelings with anyone. Interestingly, help comes not from a visitor but from another patient. Christy is just what Don needed. Being able to share his pain and discomfort with someone who is going through the same thing brings a measure of healing. Despite knowing that Christy will someday lead a normal life when he will not, Don is able, for the first time, to look past his own pain and focus on someone else. Don is pulled farther out of himself by Jay. Jay's blunt assessment that Don needs to stop being selfish startles Don, but works to open his eyes to what is happening around him. Don is slowly learning to move forward with his new life and inching closer to understanding God's purpose.



# Chapter Ten: More Miracles and Chapter Eleven: Back to Church

## Chapter Ten: More Miracles and Chapter Eleven: Back to Church Summary and Analysis

Don continues to suffer from severe depression. He is battling anger, which is often unleashed on the medical staff. The doctors and nurses continue to encourage Don, even as he questions over and over how long he will be confined to the Iliazrov frame. One day as a nurse is removing staples from Don's arm, she suggests that he let out all his frustrations in a yell. Don realizes that he has been extremely rude to the people trying to help him, but he cannot yell. If he yells, Don feels he would lose control.

After 105 days in the hospital, Don is released to go home. The entire nursing staff from the orthopedic ward gathers to join Don on his trip down the elevator and outside to a waiting ambulance. Don is in awe of their support and feels as if they are telling him that they expect him to walk back in someday to visit. Before leaving the hospital, Don spent a night crying out of desperation. Unable to watch another TV rerun, Don asks a nurse to set up the cassette player that Eva brought him so he can listen to some inspirational music. As Don listens to the songs he has heard millions of times before, he finds new meaning in the words. For the first time, Don opens his mouth and utters words of praise instead of frustration. As tears stream down his cheeks, Don feels a sense of calm flowing over him. For the first time since the accident Don feels at peace and his depression lifts. Don realizes that he does not know when the pain will end or how long he will have to wear the frame, but he knows that God will always be with him. Don views the end of his depression as another miracle.

One of the hardest aspects of Don's recovery is the knowledge that his children have had to deal with a great deal of pain. Don's children, Nicole, Joseph and Christopher, do their best to cope with their father's accident. Every day after school, Chris comes home and gives Don a gentle hug before changing his clothes to play. Don views the gesture as an expression of Chris's grief and feels badly that his children must deal with such a difficult situation.

Six months after the accident, Don is healthy enough to escort Nicole during a church ceremony recognizing her accomplishments for Girls in Action. The youth group acknowledges outstanding young people and their faith. Nicole managed to complete the requirements on her own without the help of her mother and father because they were busy with Don's recovery. On the day of the ceremony Nicole wheels her father's wheelchair down the church aisle, while Joe and Chris carry the crown and scepter Nicole will receive for her efforts. Both Nicole and Don are overwhelmed with emotion during the service.



When Don returns home, he still requires a great deal of care. Eva cannot stay home to be with him, so church members organize the "Don Patrol." The group establishes a schedule of volunteers, who come to the Piper's home to feed, bath and keep Don company every day. Don's church also arranges for the family to move to a new home more accommodating for a man in a hospital bed and wheelchair. While Don is still in the hospital, church members gather to pack up and move the family into the new house. Don continues to work with a therapist and eventually takes his first unassisted steps at home. The day is a great victory for Don and a tribute to the thousands of people praying for his recovery.

After being home a week, Don decides he is strong enough to attend church. Since Don is not sure how well he will tolerate the outing, the Piper's tell only a small group from the congregation so no one will be disappointed if Don does not make it on Sunday morning. Six members of Don's church arrive Sunday morning with a van from which they remove the seats in order to load Don and his wheelchair inside. They also construct a ramp to wheel Don inside the church. When Don arrives at the church, he is greeted by shouts of surprise and encouragement as the congregation realizes who is inside the church van. Don is wheeled inside and asked to speak to the congregation. Exhaustion is beginning to set in and he is at a loss for words. Don sits in his wheelchair before his congregation as they applaud. He realizes that they are not applauding for him but for the power of God's greatness. Don is finally able to give a brief statement before the church erupts into another round of applause.

By nature, most people have difficulty letting go of control. Although Don cannot stand, walk, roll over in bed or use the restroom unassisted, he refuses to let go of the only thing he can control, and that is his composure. Instead of viewing crying or screaming as a way to release pent-up emotions, Don feels that he would be giving up the last shred of control he has. It is interesting that even Don, who is a pastor and knows the power of God, cannot let go and allow God to control the situation. Over and over God has shown Don His might by answering numerous prayers. Through the words of songs that Don has sung many times that sink into his exhausted mind, Don is reminded of God's capabilities. Once Don is able to let God have total control of his recovery, he is ready to go home and face the next stage of the healing process.

Don has spent 105 days confined to a hospital unable to take control of his own body or his life. When Don is released from the hospital to go home, he is set free from a physical and emotional bondage. Although it will be several months before Don can be self-sufficient, he is at least able to return to a semi-normal life in the comfort of his home with his family close by. The release from the hospital appears to trigger a fierce desire to return to normal as quickly as possible. For the first time since his accident, Don exhibits a sense of determination that pays off when he takes his first unaided steps. Once again God answers prayer.



# Chapter Twelve: Opening Up and Chapter Thirteen: The Clasping Hand

## Chapter Twelve: Opening Up and Chapter Thirteen: The Clasping Hand Summary and Analysis

Don has difficulty discussing his trip to heaven with anyone for several years after the accident. Don told Eva only a tiny portion of what had happened, and she never pesters him with questions, sensing he is not ready to talk. One day, David Gentiles visits Don at home and asks Don how he is feeling. As the conversation progresses, Don begins to share the entire story of his ninety minutes in heaven with David. Don has been reluctant to voice his story for fear that people would consider him crazy, but as Don talks, David listens intently showing no sign of skepticism. David asks Don why he thinks he was allowed to experience heaven if he was not meant to share the story. David asks the question several times before suggesting that God wants Don to use his story to encourage others. David then challenges Don to pick two people with whom to share his story and use their reaction to gauge whether God really wants Don to tell others about his experience.

Don agrees to David's challenge and carefully selects two people to tell about his time in heaven. Both people listen intently as Don tells them about heaven; they tell him he needs to share his story with others. Don shares his story with groups and individuals, but to this day he struggles with the retelling. He is reluctant to share unless someone asks or seems in desperate need of hearing his experience. However, each time Don relates the tale of his ninety minutes in heaven, people gather around him eager to listen and ask questions. Don's decision to share his experience with others makes him realize several things. Don is convinced that God answers prayer since Don is living proof. He also knows that God still performs miracles, which is why Don is able to walk again. Don's desire to share his story becomes motivated out of a need to tell people about heaven so they will not die afraid of what is to come. Dick Onerecker is similarly affected by Don's experience. Dick now makes an effort to share his faith with others whether they are in crisis or not.

Since the accident, Don has had a very distinct memory of Dick holding his hand while praying for him in the car. Every time Don tells his story he makes sure to mention how he came back to earth singing "What a Friend We Have in Jesus," and Dick's hand holding his tightly. One night at a dinner party as Don recounts his story again, Dick's wife, Anita, leans over to him and whispers that Dick never held Don's hand. Don stares at her in disbelief as Anita explains how Dick had to squeeze through the trunk and was barely able to reach Don's shoulder. Don's hand was laying on the passenger side door and there was no possible way Dick could have reached it. Don realizes that the hand he felt holding him tightly was an angel's. Don realizes that even when he does not feel it, that hand is always there supporting Don as he moves through life.



It is not surprising that Don has difficulty telling others about his trip to heaven. Most people are skeptical of people claiming to have near death experiences. The connotation is that such stories are false and the people telling them are crazy. Since no one can know for sure what heaven will be like, stories proclaiming dark tunnels that lead to bright light, angels with long white robes and harps and pearly gates and Saint Peter looking up names in the Book of Life are viewed as cartoon-like images. However, Don's experience is nothing like that. His view of heaven is calming, peaceful and warm. Listeners recognize that Don's story is not a hoax and find comfort and hope from its telling.





# Chapter Fourteen: The New Normal

## Chapter Fourteen: The New Normal Summary and Analysis

Don spends a great deal of time thinking about his life before the accident and lamenting that he will never again be normal. After a while, Don realizes that he cannot recapture the past and will have to find a new normal. There are many things Don will never do again that he will miss. On a ski trip with the church youth, Don must sit inside and watch the teenagers enjoying the slopes. Because of the damage to his legs, Don will never be able to get down on his knees to talk to a child face-to-face. Drive-thrus present a challenge as well, since Don cannot reach for change with his left arm and must awkwardly use his right arm. These are just a few examples of everyday obstacles Don faces.

Eva is required to take over Don's role as head of the household. This means that she must handle bills, bank accounts, insurance and the majority of family life. God grants Eva the strength and wisdom to take care of the family's everyday life and remain calm during Don's long recovery. Thankfully the church does not stop paying Don's salary but the possibility that they might hang over Don and Eva. One of the biggest challenges Eva faces is purchasing a van that will accommodate Don when he is released from the hospital. Don is very proud of his wife when she successfully purchases the van on her own. Eva is also responsible for arranging Don's doctor visits and making sure he gets to and from the doctor's office. Don often criticizes Eva's decision-making skills. His criticism is motivated by his own feelings of helplessness. Later when Don realizes how he acted toward his wife, he feels badly and wishes he had been a better patient.

The worst part of Don's recovery is the fact that Don and Eva have to send their kids to live with family and friends. Christopher and Joseph stay with Eva's parents in Louisiana while Nicole moves in with friends so that she does not have to switch schools. For six months, the children visit Don and Eva only on weekends. Don worries that his children miss out on a lot of experiences with their father as a result of his accident. The boys probably suffer the most because Don cannot participate in many of the sports they enjoy, so the twins quit doing them in Don's presence.

Don asks all three of his children to write about how his accident affected their lives. Nicole reports that it was very difficult to live away from her parents for so long. She says that she has a new-found appreciation for her family. She also learns how to use prayer to help her through difficult situations. Nicole admits to being angry about her father's accident but eventually she realizes how fortunate they all are to have their father still alive. As the oldest, Nicole is able to reflect more on the changes she witnesses in her family and to accept that Don's accident brought the family closer and made them stronger.



Joe remembers being picked up from school and taken to the hospital to see Don. The first time Joe saw his father after the accident, he was shocked and did not mind that the nurses did not let the children stay very long. Joe also admits to feelings of anger and depression. He sees all his friends enjoying activities with their fathers and wishes that he could have those experiences, too. Joe realizes that if the family did not have God in their lives, they probably would not have handled the situation as well as they did.

Chris says that he went through a period of denial thinking that his father's injuries were not that serious and Don would be home in a week. Chris is fascinated by the Iliazrov frame but feels badly that his father has to be in such pain. Each time Chris visited his Dad, he would give him a gentle hug and continued to do so even when Don returned home. Chris echoes his brother's sentiments regarding the lack of father-son activities but, like his sister, is glad the family was able to grow closer.

Eva also offers Don her feelings about the effect of the accident on the family. Eva is most surprised by Don's failure to fight following the accident. She feels he is a different person because she is used to Don fighting for everything. Eva admits that she had to bite her tongue on several occasions to keep herself from telling Don something he did not want to know. She learned to remain calm and allow Don to return to himself on his own. Overall, Eva continues to view her husband as remarkable man.

As Don thinks about how the accident affected his family, he feels it is hardest on his parents. Don is the oldest of three boys and all of them have always been healthy. Don's mother faints the first time she sees him lying in ICU. However, she recovers from her shock enough to take care of Don at home, while Eva chaperons the church youth group at a week-long summer camp. Don enjoys having his mother care for him except for one daily occurrence - going to the bathroom. Don is unable to get out of bed and must use a bedpan. The first time Don's mother has to empty the bedpan, Don hears her singing as she cleans it out in the bathroom. Don realizes that his mother's joy at caring for her son supersedes such an unpleasant task.

Doctors warn Don that he will not live a long, productive life because of injuries. Fifteen years after his accident, Don begins to feel the first effects of arthritis. His left knee also hyper-extends at odd moments, leaving Don spilled on the ground. On a visit to Dr. Grieder, Don asks just how bad he was when he first arrived at the hospital. Dr. Grieder says that he has seen worse, but Don is the only one who survived. Don knows the grace of God and the power of prayer brought him back to earth to fulfill God's purpose. Don's accident has forced him to adapt a "new" normal way of living, but Don is finally able to accept his life knowing he will one day return to heaven.

Family are the first people to respond in times of crisis and also the ones who have the most difficulty dealing with that crisis. Don perceives that his family suffers more than he does following his accident. While Don has only the responsibility of growing physically stronger, his family must shoulder the burden of caring for him, paying mounting medical bills and adjusting their lives to accommodate Don's new life. In reality, Don is not the only one who must find a new normal way of living.



Don views the new normal as a bad thing at first. However, the reader will realize that with the exception of Chris and Joe, most of the people closest to Don benefited from his accident in unusual ways. Don did not exclude Eva from important household decisions, but she was never solely responsible for them either. Now that Eva is the only breadwinner and decision maker, she gains a new confidence in herself. She also appreciates Don more for all the hard work he shoulders for the family. Nicole learns to appreciate her family more and gains independence. She works hard to achieve her goal of fulfilling the Girls in Action responsibilities and can proudly say that she earned her ceremony on her own. Chris and Joe are robbed of the opportunity to engage in many father-son activities, but they also gain a deeper appreciation for their family. The boys respect the fact that Don cannot run and play like he once did and do their best to shelter their father from any disappointment by not engaging in sports with him. However, the reader may wonder if this is the best course of action, since Don is fully aware of his disabilities and already harbors concerns for his sons in that respect. The reader tends to think that the boys would have served their father better if they had gone ahead with their activities, so Don could at least participate as a spectator.

Perhaps Don's mother best embodies the role of family during Don's recovery. Although she must empty her son's bedpans, she does so with a happy heart, glad that she can do something to assist her child. The sentiment is the same as all the visitors Don finally permit to help him during his hospital stay. No one can bring Don's health back, which is what they all want very badly to do, but they can bring magazines, milkshakes, give hugs and feed Don meals. The smallest gesture is an expression of love, and that is the normal way to live.



# Chapter Fifteen: Touching Lives

## Chapter Fifteen: Touching Lives Summary and Analysis

Don finds that God brings him in contact with people desperately in need of hearing his story. One day, Don is a guest speaker at a large church. As he speaks, a woman near the front of the congregation begins to sob and continues to cry throughout Don's speech. After the meeting, the woman approaches Don and tells him that her mother passed away the previous week. The lady says that Don's story has given her reassurance that her mother is in heaven and at peace.

Two years after his accident Don takes the youth group to hear a speaker in Houston. Don is still in leg braces and walks with crutches. They get a late start leaving Don's church, and he worries that they will miss out on good seats. When they arrive in Houston, the group discovers that the only seats left are at the very top of the auditorium, requiring Don to climb 150 steps. Don is exhausted by the time he joins the kids in the balcony, and he leans against the wall to catch his breath. Looking around the arena Don sees a young man seated in a wheelchair slumped over with his head in his hands. Don feels that he must go speak with the teenager and slowly makes his way down several steps to the other side of the auditorium. As Don approaches the young man, he realizes that the boy is wearing an Iliazrov frame. Don shares his own story of recovery using the fixator while the boy listens with tears in his eyes. The young man thanks Don for his words of encouragement and comments how nice it is to have someone understand what he is going through. The teenager contacts Don three times after their initial meeting to talk. Don realizes that if the youth group had not been late leaving the church he would not have climbed to the balcony, where this young man was waiting to be ministered to.

Don appears on a Houston TV show, where he is the only scheduled guest and he is to share his experience. A woman phones the TV station asking to speak with Don, but producers will not connect her. After the show, Don is given the woman's name and phone number. When he reaches the woman she tells Don that her brother is in an Iliazrov frame after another man blew his leg apart in a bar brawl. Don says he will go meet with the man, but the woman says that it would be better if Don just calls on the phone. Don immediately calls the man and is subjected to a verbal assault. Don waits until the man is finished and then calmly tells his story. As the two men talk, Don realizes that the man's leg is infected and instructs the woman to rush him to the hospital. The next day the woman calls Don to tell him that if they had not got to the hospital when they did, her brother would have lost his leg. Again Don is amazed at the way God arranged for Don to be on TV at just the right time to help this man.

There are many more stories of people that Don's story helps. A classmate of Nicole's at Louisiana State University spends time talking to Don when he visits for a speaking engagement. Several months later Nicole calls to tell her father that the classmate,



Walter Foster, passed away from a heart condition. Don is shocked by the news but realizes that Walter's endless questions about heaven were the young man's way of making peace with an almost-certain future. Don knows that Walter will be waiting to welcome Don the next time Don goes to heaven.

Sue Fayle loses her first husband to cancer. She finds a new friend in her neighbor, Charles, who also lost his wife to cancer. The widow and widower's friendship grows and they eventually marry. Charles firmly states that if he is ever diagnosed with cancer, he will kill himself instead of putting Sue through that pain again. One day, Charles is diagnosed with cancer but his feelings regarding ending his life have changed. Sue asks Don to talk with Charles about his salvation and the reality of heaven. Over a period of several visits, Charles finds peace about his impending death and his passage to heaven. When Charles passes away, Sue calls to tell Don that Charles died without fear, and she is looking forward to seeing Charles and her first husband again in heaven.

One of Don's sons, Joe, gets his driver's license and they look for a used vehicle for him. Joe decides on a Ford Ranger truck at a dealership run by Gary Emmons. Gary and the Piper family form a friendship, and Don buys several cars from Gary over the years. One day Joe stops at the dealership, and Gary tells him about a new car he has just purchased at an auction. When Gary got inside to inspect the car he pushed a button on the tape player and Don's story poured out. Since the car was sold at auction the previous owner is not known and Gary cannot return the tape. Gary had always wanted to hear Don's story, but the opportunity had not presented itself. Don decides that God made sure Gary heard his story.

Don's new church, the First Baptist Church of Pasadena, has a large congregation, and Eva often teases Don that it takes him thirty minutes to walk a few feet because he gets stopped by parishioners. One day a woman stops Don to tell him about a very ill woman who was hospitalized. The woman was not a believer but someone brought her a copy of Don's story on tape and left it for her. The woman's health grew steadily worse until she had only a few weeks to live. When the woman's daughter arrived to see her mother, the mother put Don's tape in the cassette player. After listening to the tape, the dying woman accepts Jesus as her Savior and tells her daughter that she will be going to heaven. The daughter turns the tape over, and as her mother passes away, she is listening to Don's description of heaven.

Don preaches at a neighboring church. Before he gives his speech, a soloist sings a song called "Broken and Spilled Out." As Don speaks he realizes that several people are frowning at the woman. After the service several people confront the woman about her choice of music. The woman did not realize that her song would be misconstrued as rude and apologizes to Don. Don is not offended and tells her that in many ways it was a fitting song. In many ways Don was broken and spilled out, but God has seen fit to put him back together again.

The stories in this chapter are proof that God has a plan for each person even in the midst of traumatic events. As Don lies helplessly in his hospital bed, it is difficult to



imagine any possible use for his crushed body. However, Don is not, nor ever will be, the only person to suffer such a tragedy. Don knows that people are to be compassionate and empathetic to others, but until he has his accident, he does not truly understand how to exhibit these behaviors. For Don, the process of healing is much more than learning to walk again. As Don struggles to process what has happened to him, various people point out that Don must open himself up if he is going to survive. Don must accept the help of others, learn to share his story and adjust to a new way of living his life. All these steps in his recovery result in increased understanding and compassion for others suffering physical, emotional and spiritual ailments. For the rest of his life, Don is inexplicably drawn to these people in times of need. God uses Don's life to minister to others who are hurting and to continue to enrich Don's life by renewing his faith in heaven and answered prayer.



# **Chapter Sixteen: Finding Purpose, Chapter Seventeen: Longing for Home and Chapter Eighteen: The Why Questions**

## **Chapter Sixteen: Finding Purpose, Chapter Seventeen: Longing for Home and Chapter Eighteen: The Why Questions Summary and Analysis**

A local police officer almost loses a leg when his police motorcycle crashes into the back of a truck. A friend asks Don to go visit Brad and tells Don that the officer has been fitted with an Iliazrov frame. Brad suffers from the same depression Don experienced while laying immobile in the hospital. Don shows Brad pictures of himself in his Iliazrov frame and shares the frustrations he felt with the lack of optimism from his doctors. Don then gives Brad and his wife advice about how to approach his recovery. He counsels them to be patient with the medical staff, to limit visitors and prepare for therapy. Several weeks later, Don sees Brad at a restaurant and asks how the officer is feeling. Brad says he is slowly getting better.

Two years after Don's accident, he learns that Chad Vowell, a former youth minister at South Park, was involved in a car accident. When Don contacts Chad's mother, she tells him that Chad has undergone surgery to have a fixator attached to his leg. Don immediately plans to visit Chad in the hospital. Chad's usually bright demeanor is replaced by a sullen, monotone persona. Don talks with Chad in much the same manner as he approached Brad, assuring the young man that he will be fine after some time.

Eva's sister-in-law, Joyce Pentecost, dies of cancer a week before she turns thirty-nine. Don is deeply saddened at the loss because Joyce was a fireball of a woman who loved to sing. Over six-hundred people attend Joyce's memorial service. Joyce's father speaks and then Don addresses the gathering. Don shares that Joyce always envisioned herself meeting God at heaven's gate and loved to listen to Don tell about his ninety minutes in heaven. Don is glad that he had the opportunity to share his experience over and over again with Joyce before she passed away. He realizes that by telling others his story, he is helping to prepare them for their eventual journey to heaven.

Don realizes that he was sent back to earth for a purpose. His experience with the Iliazrov frame gives him special insight into the journey that others face. Don is able to give advice and comfort from a knowledgeable perspective. Don gives people peace that he wishes someone could have given him when he was recovering. Since his



accident, Don spends a great deal of time thinking about heaven. Before his accident, heaven was something that Don believed in but did not consider it as being a real place. Besides being able to commiserate with other Iliazrov patients, Don is able to reassure people that heaven is more than a concept. Don is secure in that knowledge and looks forward to the day he returns to stay in heaven. After many surgeries, countless hours lying in a hospital bed, indescribable pain and severe depression, Don has come to the realization that his life serves a purpose that needs to be fulfilled before God calls him home again.

Don has always been skeptical of people proclaiming to have had a near-death experience. His research on the topic has led him to find discrepancies in their stories and to consider their tales rehearsed. One study reports that these people suffered from oxygen deprivation, which resulted in visual hallucinations. Another study stands firm that the deprivation of oxygen to the brain had nothing to do with the patient's experiences of seeing bright lights in heaven. Don does not seek to solve the debate. He only tells what he experienced and knows it to be true.

Don still struggles with the question of why? He questions why he was in the accident, why he was allowed to glimpse heaven and why he had to come back; in short, he questions everything. Don has no answers to any of his questions. His lack of answers makes writing his story extremely difficult until he partners with Cec Murphey to put the story on paper. Don is saved the emotional trauma of trying to relate his story alone. There are people who consider Don's story false, but like the blind man made to see by Jesus, Don cannot explain what happened, only that it did. Don knows he died and went to heaven; he knows God sent him back to fulfill a purpose, and he knows that he will one day return to see the face of God inside the opalescent gates.

The final three chapters of the book tie up many loose ends and acknowledge that some questions will never be answered. Don lists several examples of lives he has touched and ways that his accident has brought new opportunities to his own life. As Don touches life after life with his story, he comes to realize exactly what God had in store for him when he sent him back to earth. It is difficult as impatient humans to wait for God to speak and reveal His plans. For Don, the difficulty is multiplied by his long recovery. It takes several years for Don to know what God wants him to do; once the knowledge is made clear, the task is not easy. Don is now one of hundreds of people proclaiming to have visited heaven. While Don only relates the positive responses to his experience, he does admit that not everyone is so accepting. Don knows what happened to him and believes in its validity. It is not up to him to convince others of the truth of his story. Don can only speak his truth and allow God to use those words to work in the lives of the listeners. Don's story is powerful, and whether someone who hears it is skeptical or not, Don's experience will still impact them in some way.





# Characters

## Don Piper

Don Piper is a Baptist minister living outside Houston, Texas. Don is married to Eva, and the couple have three children: Nicole, Christopher and Joseph. Don is an active, healthy man who enjoys his work and loves spending time with his family. A large part of that life is changed on January 18, 1989, when Don's small Ford Focus is struck by an eighteen-wheeler and crushed against the railing of a bridge. Don dies in the accident. Paramedics arrive on the scene, pronounce Don dead, cover his car with a tarp and move on to assist other crash victims.

Don is dead for ninety minutes before he comes back to life. During those ninety minutes, Don is in heaven surrounded by family, friends, glorious music and a brilliant luminescence. Don is a physical reminder of answered prayer. A Baptist preacher arrives on the accident scene and prays that Don will be free of internal and head injuries despite being told that Don is dead. Surprisingly, Don is found free of all internal and head injuries after being evaluated by doctors. Don suffers several other traumatic injuries, including a shattered left leg that is placed in an experimental device known as the Iliazrov frame used to regrow bone. Don faces a long road of recovery and a life of chronic pain.

As Don recovers from his accident, he struggles to understand why he was allowed to glimpse heaven only to be returned to earth and, in his opinion, a subnormal life. Don must confront himself and work through issues of dependency, compassion and faith. Don does not like having others do things for him and sinks into a depression because he is incapable of doing the smallest task on his own. A close friend finally tells Don that he must snap out of it and allow people to express their love in the only way they know how. Don slowly begins to open himself to the kindness of visitors and realizes that by turning down their offers of assistance, he was preventing them from loving him. Don also continually asks God why such a horrific accident happened to him. Don cannot find anything positive in his experience until he ventures outside his home and finds people hungry for his story. Don's description of heaven gives people hope, and he is better able to understand others hurting from terrible pain. Don's faith is strengthened as he learns even more to let go of his own life and trust in God's plan and timing.

## Eva Piper

Eva Piper is Don's wife. Her actual participatory role in the book is minimal, but she is a strong force behind the scenes. Eva is a schoolteacher used to letting Don run their household. She follows the Biblical teaching that the man is the head of the household. Before Don's accident, Eva never purchased a car or made important household decisions on her own. Eva is forced into an unfamiliar role, but she accepts it with a calmness and strength that many readers will find inspiring.



Don does not mention if Eva completely broke down upon learning that her husband had died. He rarely notes when Eva cries. Instead, Eva is portrayed as the picture of rational thinking and poise throughout Don's recovery. Eva's immense faith certainly plays a role in her ability to continue on in the face of such tragedy. Eva is now the sole source of income for the family and must return to work once all her vacation days have been exhausted. After a full day spent teaching, Eva travels to the hospital to be with Don until late at night. There is no one at home for Eva to talk to or cry upon their shoulder. The couple's children stay with friends and relatives while Don is recuperating, and the burden of their mother's fears would be too much for them to handle.

Although Eva appears only a few times throughout the course of the book, the reader learns a great deal from her. Eva certainly questions why such a tragedy happened to her family, but she accepts God's will and works to continue on the best way she can. Eva also puts aside her own feelings to support Don as he struggles to make sense of everything. She is understanding but firm not allowing Don to wallow in pity. Eva challenges her husband to seek out the good in the situation and find ways to turn his accident into something positive. Most importantly, Eva never loses faith. She continues to praise God in the midst of her questioning.

## Dick Onerecker

Dick Onerecker and his wife, Anita, are also attendees at the Trinity Pines conference. They leave just minutes before Don and were headed in the same direction. When the Onerecker's stop for coffee before crossing the bridge, Don passes them and becomes involved in the accident. Dick and Anita decide to leave their car in the long line of traffic held up by the wreck and walk up to the scene to offer their assistance. Dick receives a strong message from God telling him to pray for the man in the red car, even though the EMT says that the gentleman is deceased. Dick prays specifically that the man will have no head or internal injuries. When Don returns to earth, Dick hurries from the car to fetch an EMT; later, MRIs reveal that Don had no internal or head injuries.

Years after the accident, Dick tells Don that he (Dick) was set free that day. Dick used to feel embarrassed sharing his testimony of faith with people, but his experience in Don's mangled car gives him the courage to tell others about Christ. Dick dies in 2001, of a heart attack. Although Don is saddened by the loss of his friend, he takes comfort knowing that Dick was prepared for heaven because of Don's story.

## The People Don's Story Touches

Don's story touches many lives—so many that he could never possibly tell about them in one book, but he does mention a few that stood out to him. A few years after the accident, Don takes his church's youth group to hear a youth pastor speak. The event is held at a large church in Houston and the group is late arriving, leaving them no choice but to sit at the very top of the auditorium. Don is not happy about having to climb all the stairs in his leg braces and is exhausted by the time he gets to his seat. Don tries to



catch his breath and rest when he sees a boy sitting in a wheelchair with his head in his hands. Don makes his way across the balcony to the boy to discover that the teenager is wearing an Ilizarov frame. Don suddenly realizes that he was meant to arrive late, so he would meet this young man. Don talks to the boy for several minutes before giving him a business card with his personal phone number on it. The boy calls Don three times over the next three months, and then Don does not hear from him again.

During an appearance on a local TV show, a phone call comes in asking for Don. The show producers will not put Don on the phone but take the lady's number, and Don calls her as soon as his appearance is finished. The woman says that her brother is in an Ilizarov frame after having his leg shot off in a bar brawl. The man is very bitter and will not let people visit him. Don takes down the man's phone number. The man yells obscenities at Don but listens as Don calmly tells about his own experience with the frame. As the two men talk, Don realizes that the man's leg is infected. Don instructs the man's sister to get him to the hospital, where doctors say he arrived just in time before he lost the leg to infection.

There are several other people that Don mentions in the book. Each share the same characteristics: they are in pain, depressed or suffering spiritual frustration. Don meets or talks to every one of them at the exact right moment. Don always wonders why a certain event takes place, but after each encounter realizes that God orchestrated the situation so that Don would meet and help the person in need.

## **Nicole, Christopher, and Joseph Piper**

Nicole, Chris and Joe are Don and Eva's children. At the time of Don's accident Nicole is twelve and the twin boys are eight. The boys go to live with Eva's parents in Louisiana while Don recovers in the hospital. They visit as often as possible on weekends and school holidays. Nicole moves in with a family friend so she does not have to switch schools or leave her friends.

Their father's accident affects the children in different ways. For the most part, they are at first unsure how to act around Don. Chris is the only one who consistently gives his father a small hug every time he sees him, whether it is in the hospital or at home. Chris later says that he did this to reassure himself that his father was going to be alright but also hopes it helped comfort Don. Both of the boys struggle to enjoy activities around their father. Don is not able to play catch or sports because of his loss of balance and the risk of falling. This does not completely stop Don from playing with his children, but the boys adjust their activities so that Don will not feel badly when he cannot join them.

Nicole is most affected by being away from her parents for such a long time. However, she later writes that the experience gave her a greater appreciation for her family that she might not have had otherwise. As a twelve year old, she is just beginning to be active in social activities. One of Don's first outings is to escort Nicole to a ceremony for Girls in Action. The church group is awarding Nicole the status of Queen, and tradition



maintains that the girls' fathers walk them down the aisle. Don is wheeled down the aisle by Nicole so he can participate.

Like their mother, the children hold fast to their faith to see them through this difficult time. They are sensitive enough to their father's needs to do their best to make him feel normal. Don regrets that the boys are not able to participate in more sports because he cannot play with them. Overall though the children appear to come through the experience as stronger people and stronger Christians.

## **David Gentiles**

David is Don's best friend. He lives in San Francisco but makes the 200 mile drive to visit Don in the ICU when Eva calls him. Don is suffering double pneumonia and barely hanging on to life. David tells Don that he does not have to do anything to recover except lay there. David then organizes an all-night prayer vigil to pray Don through his recovery. Almost two years after Don's accident, David is the first person that Don tells about his experience in heaven. Don has been reluctant to share his story with people, afraid they will consider him crazy. David listens intently to Don's account and then encourages him to share the story with others. David feels Don has been brought back to earth in order to share his story.

## **Christy**

Christy is a teenage girl who has elective surgery to fix a noticeable discrepancy in the length of her legs. Christy has the Ilizarov frame attached to her leg. She is in a neighboring room from Don at the hospital. Many times at night, Don can hear her moaning and crying. The two soon become friends and write letters to one another that the nurses ferry back and forth. Christy is in the hospital for twelve weeks, but she and Don never meet face to face. Christy is also a believer in God and the two of them often discuss their faith.

## **Jay B. Perkins**

Jay is an eighty-year-old retired minister, who steps in to preach at South Park Baptist while Don is recovering from his accident. Jay also visits Don regularly in the hospital. One day when Don is particularly depressed, Jay confronts Don about his negative attitude. Jay tells Don that people care and are only trying to love him. Jay challenges Don to pick two people and ask them to do something for him. Don takes Jay's advice and slowly realizes that he has been shutting out those who care about him.

## **Sue Fayle and Charles**

Sue and Charles are neighbors and are both widowed. Their shared experience of losing a spouse to cancer gives them common ground to build a friendship. This



friendship eventually grows into a more intimate relationship and are married. Charles says that if he is ever diagnosed with cancer he will kill himself. Not long after Sue and Charles are married, Charles is diagnosed with cancer. He faces a difficult road and struggles with his faith. Don talks with Charles about his experience in heaven so Charles eventually comes to accept his fate.

## **J.V. Thomas**

J.V. Thomas is a Baptist minister attending the conference at Trinity Pines. He and Don take a walk the night before Don's accident to discuss Don's desire to start a new church. Don later reflects that his walk with J.V. was the last one he ever took as a whole and healthy man.



# Objects/Places

## Trinity Pines

A large conference center operated by the Union Baptist Association of the greater Houston area. Don has been at Trinity Pines for three days attending a conference. It is on his way home that the accident occurs.

## Angel Wings

Don does not see actual angel wings on the people who come to greet him in heaven. He knows angels are there because he can hear them. Don says that the wings sound like never-ending praise, and they remind him of a time when he surprised a group of birds while walking in the woods.

## Radiance

Don states that heaven is full of a radiance that does not fade. As Don moves from one area to another, the light only grows brighter and areas behind him do not darken.

## Music

One of Don's most salient memories of heaven is the music. He recalls hearing a multitude of voices all singing different songs at the same time. The songs ranged from modern music to ancient chants. Rather than sound like a cacophony, Don says the music is amazingly beautiful. He cannot decide whether angels are singing, or if the voices are the humans come to greet him at the gate.

## The Gate

The gate to heaven stands in a wall that extends indefinitely in both directions. Don can see neither the top of the wall nor the top of the gate. Don states that, unlike earthly conceptions of the gate being made of pearls, it is more pearlescent. The gate glows and radiates with a breathtaking brilliance.

## Baptist General Convention of Texas (BGCT)

The BGCT is the annual convention of Baptist churches in the Houston area. Don has been at the January conference for the past three days; this is where he is heading home from when his accident occurs.



## **Injuries**

Don suffers a series of injuries from his accident. Don's right leg is crushed; his left leg is shattered in two places and is missing four and a half inches of bone, and his left arm is dislocated and is barely attached to his shoulder. His face is covered in shards of glass; the doctors are amazed that Don has not lost all the blood in his body. Amazingly, for all these devastating injuries, Don does not have any internal or head injuries.

## **Jaws of Life**

The Jaws of Life is a saw-type device used to cut away mangled pieces of metal in order to extract victims from a wreckage. Don cannot be removed from the car until the Jaws of Life have cut away the roof of his car. The closest set of the Jaws of Life are located in Huntsville, which is thirty miles away from the accident scene.

## **Hermann Hospital Trauma Center**

The Herman Hospital is located in Houston. Don is taken to two different hospitals close to the accident scene but neither are equipped to handle his injuries. The decision is made to take Don to Herman Hospital, but Life Star is unable to fly due to inclement weather so Don must make the eighty-mile trip in an ambulance.

## **Gulf Freeway and the Bridge**

Don usually travels Highway 59 back and forth to Trinity Pines, the place where the BGCT holds conferences. The highway travels over Lake Livingston, which is a man-made lake created by the damming of Trinity River. The highway narrows as it travels over the lake, and there are no shoulders for cars to pull off the road. At the end of the highway is the original bridge that spanned Trinity River followed by a sharp rise that makes visibility difficult in both directions.

## **Miracles**

Don does not usually do several things that he does on this occasion. He considers these coincidences miracles in the face of what happens. On his way to Trinity Pines, Don received a ticket for not wearing his seat belt. On his way home, Don puts his seat belt on remembering the ticket. The accident occurs on the bridge portion of the road where the bridge rail prevents Don's car from plunging into the lake. If the accident had occurred on the road, Don would probably have drowned since the road is not guarded from the lake below. Finally, Don suffers no internal or head injuries from the accident.



## **Ilizarov Frame**

This experimental procedure saves Don's shattered left leg. The device forces bones to grow, so that a large portion of the four inches missing from Don's leg are regrown. The fixator is a conglomeration of wires and metal rods that run inside Don's leg that are then attached to an exterior frame. Each day, the rods are turned a millimeter to stretch the bone.

## **South Park Baptist Church**

South Park is where Don works as pastor when his accident occurs. The leaders of the church, as well as the congregation, support Don and Eva throughout his entire recovery. They find a new house for the Piper family that is closer to the church and more accessible for Don. The church also continues to pay Don throughout his recovery, even though he is not working.





# Themes

## The Power of Prayer

Many people offer up prayers in times of great need. For some people, stressful moments are the only times they pray despite claiming a strong faith. Other people find themselves so overwhelmed by tragedy and feelings of frustration that such a thing could happen to them that they turn away from prayer. Don Piper experiences both aspects of prayer throughout his recovery.

Dick Onerecker is the first to begin praying for Don's recovery. Dick's prayers are astounding considering he is praying for a dead man. Not only is Dick praying for a deceased man, he is praying that the dead man will not have any internal or head injuries. Dick's belief in God is so strong that he does not hesitate or question the voice that tells him to pray for the injuries of a corpse. Dick's faithfulness is rewarded when Don returns from heaven and begins singing with Dick inside the mangled car. God also answers Dick's prayer regarding Don's injuries, since Don is found to be free of any internal or head injuries when evaluated by doctors. Dick's powerful prayer is only the start of a series of answered prayers lifted up to God by hundreds of people.

The power of prayer again comes into play when Don is suffering from double pneumonia caused by a wrongly inserted air tube. The doctors are having difficulty discovering the source of the pneumonia, and Don is quickly losing faith that he will survive. Don's long-time friend, David Gentiles, arrives at the hospital and tells Don that he does not need to do anything to recover except lay there and let others pray for him. David organizes an all-night prayer vigil and in the morning doctors realize that the air tube was inserted into Don's stomach instead of his lungs. Once the situation is remedied, Don's pneumonia goes away and he begins to regain strength.

The only unanswered prayer appears to be the one Don repeatedly offers up as he lays in the hospital racked with pain. Don asks to be allowed to die so he can return to the glory and brilliance of heaven. Throughout the book, Don continues to question why he was permitted a glimpse of glory only to be returned to a life of pain. It is not until late in the book after Don has encountered many other people suffering in similar ways that he begins to see the rationale behind his death and resurrection. Don views himself as an answer to prayer. For people on the brink of despair or depression from wavering faith, Don's story provides hope and understanding. Don is transformed by his experience from a healthy minister who preaches about love and compassion into a shadow of his former self now able to reach out and touch more lives with deeper meaning. Although Don does not phrase his question "Why?" in the form of a traditional prayer, God eventually answers Don by showing him that even in the worst situations, there is good. Prayer brought Don back to life, and prayer revitalized Don's life in a way he never imagined would be possible.



## Perfection

Readers familiar with the Bible know that God promises that one will be returned to a state of perfection in heaven. Many people may assume this means they will take a physical form that matches their earthly ideal of perfection. Perfection is an earthly idea that does not figure into heaven. People spend their entire lives trying to obtain a perfect physical form, have the perfect family or the perfect career. Don Piper is no different, despite witnessing heavenly perfection firsthand.

As Don stands in the midst of his heavenly welcoming committee, he notices that all the people are the same age as the last time he saw them on earth. They have not returned to their favorite earthly age. Their physical appearance is also the same, with the notable exception that each one has been restored to perfect health. Interestingly, none of the celestial party seems to mind retaining the last vestige of their earthly selves. Personal appearance does not factor into life in heaven.

Don struggles on earth with his mangled body. He is frustrated knowing that he is incapable of living the active lifestyle he enjoyed before the accident. As Don works through his emotional and mental recovery, he comes to realize that God allowed him to see the perfection awaiting him in heaven as reassurance that Don will be free of his injuries in the end. Additionally, Don uses his memories of the sounds and sights of heaven to comfort him while lying in the hospital and recuperating at home. In his darkest moments, the recollection of the perfect melding of thousands of voices raised in songs of praise bolster Don's spirits.

The perfection of earth is unattainable and fleeting. The perfection of heaven cannot compare to the earthly ideal. Heaven wipes away the desire for a perfect body, perfect family and perfect career. No one cares what they look like because they are united by a strong wish to worship together for eternity.

## A Sense of Time

Throughout the book, there is a jumbled sense of time. Time either speeds up, moves at a snail's pace or stops altogether. Don calls attention to the difference in time between heaven and earth and the reader becomes attuned to notice the time at different points in the story.

Don says that there is no sense of time in heaven. While he is there, he has no notion that ninety minutes have passed on earth. Events move forward as he comes closer to the gate, but the reader feels as if Don is moving in slow motion. The welcoming committee does not hurry Don to the gate and into heaven; instead, they relish Don's coming. Don feels no sense of urgency that he must pass through the gate or miss his opportunity at staying in heaven. He is contented to float along with the throng and drink in the magnificence of his surroundings. Time no longer matters because heaven is for eternity and time has no place there. Additionally, Dan notices that the members of the welcoming committee have not aged since he last saw them. All of them are exactly the



same age as when they departed earth with the noticeable difference that they have been restored to full health. No one is sick; no one is bent with age or infirmity. After Don returns to earth, he often wonders what his family and friends are doing in heaven but realizes that for them only an instant will pass before he is back with them again.

In strong juxtaposition to the absence of time in heaven is the very real sense of time once Don returns to earth. As Don recounts what happens after he begins singing with Dick Onerecker in his crushed car, he constantly mentions time even down to the exact minute. Although everyone around him is working in a frenzy to extricate Don from the car and get him to a hospital, Don experiences each moment vividly. Once Don is situated in the ICU, there is a confusion of time. Don can find no clock to tell him the time, but rather than the carefree attitude he felt about time in heaven, he suffers the depression of monotony. Unable to move Don has no choice but to endure interminable hours of pain and discomfort without knowing how long he has been in such a position.

Don does know exactly how many months he spent in the hospital, how many months he lay in a bed in his own home, the exact day he took his first steps in his living room and the day he attended church again for the first time. He has spent all those minutes wondering when he would walk or if he would ever lead a normal life again. God's timing has been in place throughout all of it. God was there when Don drove past Dick and Anita Onerecker to cross the lake first. God was there holding Don's hand while he was dead. God was always with Don during the long days of depression in the hospital. God is in charge of Don's recovery, bringing people to visit him at the perfect time that Don was in need of an encouraging word.

The absence of time in heaven as opposed to the constant reminders of time on earth speak to the fleeting nature of life. There are moments that seem to drag on forever but in the entire scope of our lives are just flashes. Only in heaven will one be able to savor each moment to its fullest free from the worry of running out of time.

# Style

## Perspective

Don Piper wrote this book as much to share his story with others as to find healing and meaning for himself. Although there are hundreds of reported cases of near-death experiences, Don's story seems to be unique. There is a real authenticity to Don's story not often found in tales of traveling down a long tunnel toward a bright light and entering the gates of heaven. Perhaps the realness of Don's story comes from his being dead for a full ninety minutes, instead of only a few moments. Additionally, Don stands in as much awe of his experience as those who hear it. Don does not take his visit to heaven lightly and struggles to find reasons for being taken and sent back.

Don says that he did not write this book for himself. This statement is only partially true. Don is not motivated by personal glory. He does not seek fame or fortune from his story and in that respect is not selfishly motivated. However, Don struggles with his experience in heaven long after his return to earth. Don has mixed emotions regarding why he was allowed to see what his future holds and then have it suddenly taken away. In order to gain perspective on his death, Don needs to write out every detail. The process of writing the book gives Don the opportunity to relieve himself of the burden that the accident, the trip to heaven's gate and recovery placed on him. It is interesting that Don is unable to write the book on his own. Like his return from death and his recovery, Don needs help to handle the situation.

## Tone

There is a hint of objectivity in this book, but the overall tone of the book is subjective. Don tries to stand back and look at his experience from an objective standpoint, but the reality of the situation prevents Don from remaining at a distance. For the reader, Don's subjectivity is a positive thing. Since Don constantly questions why he was brought back, why he was allowed to experience heaven in the first place and what the whole event means for his life, his story becomes more real for the reader. Don stands in awe of his time in heaven and does not hold back in his description of it. In fact, Don's depiction of heaven, the welcoming committee, the gate and the music are some of the most moving passages of the entire book.

There is a sense of wonder and frustration that moves through the book. Don is appreciative of his time in heaven. He acknowledges that he was given a rare opportunity. At the same time, he is constantly upset that he was brought back to a life of pain and inability, when he was content to stay in the warm embrace of lost loved ones. The story is more about Don's battle to understand what has happened to him than about his ninety minutes in heaven. Don's seesawing emotions are what the reader connects to and what draws the reader into the book. Just as Don becomes depressed, so does the reader. Although the reader cannot completely understand what it is like to

lie full of needles and hampered by a metal frame for almost a year, the reader can empathize with Don's feelings of never being completely whole again.

## Structure

The story is told in eighteen chapters, a brief prologue and an acknowledgments section. There are a few pictures scattered throughout the book. They depict Don's car after the accident, Don in the hospital and Don with his children after his recovery. The chapters are numbered and titled with a brief caption describing the chapter's focus. Each chapter is also prefaced with a Bible verse that conveys the meaning of the chapter. The Bible verses serve to show the strength of Don's faith as the reader assumes that these particular verses aided Don during his long recovery. The verses also function to progress the story, acting like a summary of the larger chapter it introduces.

The story moves quickly since the chapters are brief. The author's writing is clear, and the story is captivating. However, Don does have a tendency to jump around, particularly as he recounts the accident and the events immediately following the crash. The explanation for the slightly jumbled ordering can be attributed to the fact that Don learned most of the facts about his accident from secondhand sources. The clearest and best-written sections of the book are those that Don experienced firsthand. The depiction of heaven is intense, and the reader can feel Don's chronic pain and depression during his long days in the hospital.



## Quotes

"So I carefully fastened my seat belt. That small act would be a crucial decision."  
Chapter 1, pg. 17

"By contrast, the powerful light I had encountered when I met my friends and loved ones paled into darkness as the radiance and iridescence in front of me increased." Chapter 2, pg. 28

"Hymns of praise, modern-sounding choruses, and ancient chants filled my ears and brought not only a deep peace but the greatest feeling of joy I've ever experienced."  
Chapter 3, pg. 31

"He had no idea why he prayed as he did, except God told him to." Chapter 4, pg. 43

"When a dead man began to sing with him, Dick scrambled out of that smashed car and raced over to the nearest EMT." Chapter 5, pg. 45

"Without question, I am still alive because people prayed for me, beginning with Dick Onerecker and other people around the country, many of whom I've never met."  
Chapter 7, pg. 73

"For eleven and a half months I never went to sleep - I just passed out." Chapter 8, pg. 85

"But nothing! You're cheating them out of an opportunity to express their love to you."  
Chapter 9, pg. 95

"In my weaker moments, I didn't understand why God would return me to earth in such awful condition." Chapter 10, pg. 102

"The capacity for sacrifice and service that human beings have for one another knows no bounds." Chapter 11, pg. 116

"Why do you think you experienced heaven if you're not supposed to share it?"  
Chapter 12, pg. 125

"I wasted a lot of time thinking about how I used to be healthy and had no physical limitations." Chapter 14, pg. 137

"I have learned, however, that God brings people into my life who need me or need to hear my message, giving me the opportunity to touch their lives." Chapter 15, pg. 157

"Although I long for my heavenly home, I'm prepared to wait until the final summons comes for me." Chapter 17, pg. 197



## Topics for Discussion

At the end of the book, Don discusses Near Death Experiences. Do you consider Don's experience near death or death? How does Don's experience differ from other accounts you may have read about? Which do you feel is more plausible?

Faith in the unknown is difficult. Many people struggle with believing in a God they cannot see, hear or touch. Does Don's accident and recovery provide more credible evidence for a God?

Consider the events that Don refers to as "miracles," i.e. wearing his seatbelt, no internal injuries, accident happening on bridge not on road, etc. Do you consider these events miracles by Don's definition or simple coincidences?

Prayer is a big part of Don's story. Discuss how prayer impacted Don's recovery and whether all the prayers offered were answered.

Imagine that you are the EMT on duty when Dick Onerecker tells you that the dead man is singing. Write about your feelings, responses and the challenge to your own belief system as a result of this news.

Don is constantly in pain even after he has made a full recovery. Discuss the role of his pain. How do you feel it factors into his new life on earth and his ministry of telling others about his experience in heaven?

Consider Don's family and what they went through while Don was in the hospital and home recovering. Would the situation have been different if they had not been a family of strong faith?