

# Gary Habermas on the Scientific Evidence for Near-Death Experiences

<https://mindmatters.ai/podcast/ep268/>

Andrew McDiarmid:

Today my guest is Dr. Gary Habermas to discuss his chapter in the recent published book, *Minding the Brain: Models of the Mind, Information, and Empirical Science*, available now from Discovery Institute Press Academic. Dr. Habermas is a distinguished research professor of apologetics and philosophy at Liberty University. He has dedicated his career to the examination of the relevant historical, philosophical, and theological issues surrounding the death and resurrection of Jesus. He has contributed more than 60 chapters or articles to books and has published over 100 articles and reviews in other publications. In recent years, he has been a visiting or adjunct professor at about 15 different graduate schools and seminaries in the United States and abroad. Dr. Habermas, welcome to ID the Future.

Gary Habermas:

Thank you very much, Andrew. By the way, that 60 figure you read on the publications is now like 85.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Okay, old news, well, we'll need to update it, won't we?

Gary Habermas:

And you didn't use a books figure, but it's 50 books.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Is it? Okay. You've contributed to 50 books, well, that's awesome.

Gary Habermas:

50. Usually on the resurrection, but near death experience is probably the second or third topic I do the most research on.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Wow. Well, you've contributed a chapter on evidential near death experiences to the book *Minding the Brain*, which is a project from the Bradley Center on Natural and Artificial Intelligence at Discovery Institute. Now, for those who don't know about the book yet, *Minding the Brain* presents an array of perspectives on the mind/body problem, the idea that there are aspects of the mind that exist beyond the brain's biology. It's a topic that has captivated us since the dawn of human contemplation. Today many insist that the mind is reducible to the brain, but is that claim justified? Well, that's what this book is all about. 25 philosophers and scientists offering fresh insight into that debate. And Dr. Habermas, you are one of them. Now, what got you interested in near death accounts and what prompted you to write a chapter evaluating NDE Research?

Gary Habermas:

Well, many, many years ago, I went through an extended period of many years of doubt and questions about faith, and could faith be demonstrated? And friends made suggestions like, "What do you think about the reliability of the New Testament? Or, what about archeology? Or, what about creation or this or that?" And I thought some of those topics had more evidence than others, but I didn't think that any of them would by themselves show that Christianity was true. And then one day, I read a suggestion in a book that if Jesus was raised from the dead and if God would've raised him, what other suggestion is there other than that he would've approved of Jesus's teachings? Which by the way is that comment that God approved Jesus's teachings by raising him, it's found in both in Acts 2 and at Acts 17.

I thought to myself, well, I don't know, if God raised Jesus from the dead, maybe that could show Christianity's true, but I didn't have a clue in those days whether there was any evidence for the resurrection. So that started me on a lifelong search on the resurrection, and from there, I got into near death experiences because to me, near death experiences, if this makes sense, are an extenuation of the resurrection of Jesus in that they both occur in what we call the afterlife. So I even thought about going here and there. If resurrection then afterlife. If afterlife, we can argue backwards to the resurrection of something skeptics should be open to. Because if you already know there's an afterlife, why wouldn't you take a look at the resurrection. So it can go forwards and backwards? So to me, near death experiences are an extenuation of my study of the resurrection of Jesus.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Oh, very interesting. Now, you mentioned that as many as between nine and 20 million people in the United States alone have had a near death experience and that these cases have generated a growing interest from scholarly communities. What are some of the reasons NDEs are getting more attention these last few decades?

Gary Habermas:

Well, you've named one of them. That figure 9 to 20 is actually in a book edited by a medical doctor. And every article, if I remember correctly, every article in that book was published in a medical journal, and then they were collected and published in a book by, I believe the University of Missouri Press. So we're talking medical doctors. I think every author I think is an MD or a PhD. And the publisher was University of Missouri Press, and they were all published in a medical journal. So right away it tells you, "Wow, you mean MDs and PhDs are paying attention?" "Yes." "Okay, and how many people again?" And you already gave the figure, they suggested nine to 20 million people. So in other words, a lot of researchers and good minds with doctor's degrees. And secondly, nine to 20 million. And I would say a third reason is because there are over 300 cases, well over 300 now.

I did this in another article for Blackwell, which is a secular publisher in Oxford, England, and they claim to be the leading research press in the world. But I did an article where I claimed there's five different categories of evidence for more than 300 evidence near-death experience. In other words, those 300 can be divided into five categories. That's probably a better way to say it. And so I'm sure not just the fact that medical doctors and PhDs are studying it. Secondly, millions and millions of people have had them. And third, there's good evidence, and I think even as atheists have said, a lot of people would like to live forever. So it's a topic that kind of a tell me more kind of topic. People want to hear about it. And when you got the evidence to go along with it, people start paying attention.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Well, one thing I really appreciate about your contribution to the book is that you frame your chapter as an evaluation of recent research into cases, and you bookend it with discussion of NDE skeptics. In the

beginning you refer to a series of issues published in the Journal of Near Death Studies back in 2007 and eight, featuring NDE researcher and skeptic, Keith Augustine, and the criteria standards that he sets for what he calls corroborated vertical recollections. Now, can you tell us the types of evidence that skeptics like Augustine prefer or look for?

Gary Habermas:

Yeah. Now Augustine, I debated him years ago on a live actually secular radio station in I think Houston. And so I got to know, I don't know where he is now, but years ago when we talked nice guy and we had a good discussion, I believe he's an agnostic and he set some criteria. He and I have differences like this. I give five types of NDE evidence. Real briefly, it's evidence from inside the room, like in a hospital room, evidence from outside the room, like what if you see something out in the parking lot like a car accident? Thirdly, NDEs in the blind. Sometimes these blind persons have not seen anything since birth, and the only time they've seen anything is during an NDE, and then they go back to being blind. But they can describe what they saw almost as if they were looking at it visually.

And then there's two categories of what I call twilight zone kinds of evidence, where one of them is where living people, like it could be a nurse, it could be a doctor. They say that they actually witnessed the same NDE that the patient did. The tunnel it's not a experience that everybody has, this famous tunnel, but they said they went down the tunnel with the patient or they could see the bright light in the room, or they could see somebody coming into the light come through the ceiling and they saw it. That's a fourth kind.

And the fifth kind is where you see loved ones afterwards, which happens very frequently, but sometimes the person has been dead for a long time. Let's say a parent that's been dead for three years, they're long buried. And there's an evidential discussion. I can give you some examples, but there's an evidential discussion where they give some information that presumably nobody on earth knows and it can be checked out. And so those five categories. Now, back to your question about Augustine, as I recall, and I think I covered in that chapter, I think Augustine's favors corroboration inside the hospital room. Now, that's fine. That's fine with me. I'll take it inside the room. But I think evidence outside the room is more impressive because inside a room, somebody could always say, "Well, your hearing is the last thing to go." Or, they were resuscitating you and you saw a glimpse of the room for a couple seconds while they've resuscitated you. I would much rather go with evidence outside the room.

And then some of those cases, like the last one where you're with a loved one and they tell you something that's basically that people don't know, and you explain it to the group and they go and check it out and it's true. But the person who told you has been buried for two or three years, I think the outside the room and the two or three years later type thing from a deceased individual, personally, I think they're the most impressive kinds.

But again, Augustine said show me something inside a room. I'll give you an example. There's a case where this woman was operated on, and by the way, when I'm talking, I change a detail or two here and there just to keep from being so and saying, "Oh, I know who that is. That's Mary, or that's Fred." But she was operated on. And when it was over, the doctor came in to see her and he said, she asked if they got some good information on X, Y, Z, and he said, "Yeah, we got really good information because the machine was recording while you were out and we've got data."

And she said, "Yeah, that's my problem. Your machine was not on." And he said, "I beg your pardon. It was plugged in. I'm just making up the place. Plugged in right at the head of your bed." And she said, "No, it wasn't. You go check." And he left and went and checked and came back to his chagrin, the machine was not plugged in. So that's a case of evidence inside the room. Another one is a famous case where a person looked down on top of a six or more foot high machine and saw a number up there that

I guess they used in the hospital for finding out where this machine is, who's got it, so they can get it. And there was a 12 digit number. And the person when they came to, they told the nurses to write this down, and they said, "I'm OCD, so here's this 12 digit number up there."

And they just said, "Well, okay, what's a 12 digit number?" But later, the janitor came in and I guess a few days later, and they checked the thing out on top of the number she gave was correct. So those are inside the room.

But then I like outside the room, sometimes the outside the room ones are a mile or two miles away and they can report an accident, something going on in their home. And I will tell you this too, of all the categories of evidence, in one book alone, there's over a hundred evidenced near death experiences, and three dozen of them are where the person to whom it happened had no measurable heart or brain activity. So what we would call colloquially dead heart or a heart attack or a flat brain wave or flat heart waves. And so they had neither in about three dozen cases, and I'm sure that number's way up now, this book came out, I'm guessing almost 10 years ago.

And they could give evidence of things they saw outside. Let's say they were in a windowless room and they saw things out in the parking lot or something. But according to everything we know from the tests we have, they had neither heart nor brain activity. So I think with those kind of cases, no heart or brain, and you report something outside, I'm just making this up, but maybe an accident in the parking lot, you have a police report that shows when the accident happened and when they got things straightened out, and if the person was gone before the accident and revived after the accident, that's a pretty good check on the data. And if they didn't have any heart and brain activity, I think we're talking about some pretty heavy evidence here.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Absolutely. And it certainly reduces the argument that these are subjective internal experiences only.

Gary Habermas:

Exactly.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Yeah. Some of the distant vision accounts do stand out. I read some of them in your chapter, for example, in 1985, a red shoe was seen on a hospital roof in an NDE, and that was later confirmed. There was a girl named Crystal who almost drowned. And she recounted a visit to heaven, but also the chance to see her family at home. And she was able to recount specific details that were later confirmed. And then there was a man who saw what his house sitter was doing in Florida, several states away from him at the time.

Gary Habermas:

That guy was up in Milwaukee.

Andrew McDiarmid:

These accounts are quite interesting.

Gary Habermas:

And the house fella was in Florida. Yeah, and there's other cases where people, there's a case where a gal got her hair caught in a drain of a pool, a built-in pool, and she got her hair caught, and she was

underwater for quite a long time, and they resuscitated her. But when the paramedics got there, it was a long process of working on her and then getting her an ambulance and getting her all the way to the hospital. Well, it was about 45 minutes as I recall in this one case. And she later gave a blow by blow description of what happened to her, what they did, and I have a couple cases in my own research where people were taken out to the ambulance and on top of a lot of ambulances, if not all of them, I don't know, but on top of ambulance there's often a large number so that it can be traced by a helicopter if you're being airlift somewhere.

And I have had two cases where people correctly reported the number on the top of the ambulance, even though if you think of the kind of ambulances we have that look like vans, a person on a gurney would be, what, three feet below that number. And they're not standing up. So they could not have seen any number on top of the, especially if they were comatose and they correctly reported the number on top of the ambulance, they said they were looking down on it and they saw it right away. So that was one of the cases I used with Keith Augustine when he and I dialogue many years ago. They have 300 evidential cases, and I'll bet you that number's, I'm just guessing, I haven't looked for a long time, it's probably well over 400. To have that many evidential cases you've got, as the old saying goes, you've got different strokes for different folks.

Just about everything you can think of, an unplugged machine, a number, seeing somebody out in a parking lot where you're in a windowless room inside or seeing a case where you said your dad or somebody appeared to you in heaven and he'd been deceased for several years and he gave you some information that could only be corroborated later. And everybody was just flabbergasted. But the guy alerted through his NDE and he said he was talking to his dad. So you're totally right. The first thing that goes on these explanations are totally subjective ones. Critics, atheist, agnostics like to say, "Oh, yeah, sounds like a dream to me, or sounds like an hallucination, or sounds like, what were you drinking? Or whatever."

But none of those subjective explanations can explain sight between Milwaukee and Florida or what happened on the parking lot when you're in a windowless room or why your machine was unplugged down the hall during the surgery that the doctor thought was plugged in. There's many of these. People dropping things on the floor during surgery and then kind of blowing up like glass blowing up all over. But the person watched it. They told who dropped it, who it was that pointed it out and so on. And they were all right in the details when they did interviews, or like I said, the young girl who gave a description of the 45 minute resuscitation and taking her to the hospital.

Andrew McDiarmid:

And some of the naturalistic explanations that are put forward include things like, "Oh, the information was learned from other means, or it was a case of misperception or deception or coincidence or mistake." But as you say in the chapter, it's unlikely that every last one of these hundreds of documented evidential NDEs could be explained in those ways.

Gary Habermas:

And they're just not in the room, out of the room, down the hall, 100 miles away, two miles away, a person who's been buried for two years gives information that everybody in the family needed, and now they've got it, like where something important was put away that they hadn't found for two or three years. All of that kind of stuff that the angles from which it comes, the varieties from which it comes, all the subjective to me, subjective explanation. We deal with that with the resurrection too. The disciples saw hallucinations and we're saying, "Nah," because our earliest sources from the 30s AD after the cross said that Jesus appeared to groups, and that's a real problem for hallucinations. Well, they're like that

here too. When you have groups seeing this, sometimes, like I said, the fourth area is that there's a healthy person who witnesses the experience of the near deceased, what we call near dead, the NDE, a healthy person who witnesses what the near dead person see's.

And so to me, it comes from way too many angles to be only 1, 2, 3, or four times. Some people say It's the medicine you took, the medicine did this or that to you. Yeah, but medicines don't allow correct perception at a mile away. So yeah, I think we've covered the bases. In fact, I told my editor who edited my chapter for that book, he's a physicist and of course very interested in intelligence design and fine tuning type arguments. I told him I must've been in a bold mood one day, but I told them, I said, "I think there's enough data for NDEs that would rival at things you folks find for ID and fine tuning." They're just a lot of details. So when you put these three together, think of it this way, when you talk about natural theology, something that says religion is true, but not necessarily Christianity, not necessarily a religion. You think of categories like intelligent design, fine tuning, and now I would add near death experiences to it.

These are categories that tell us there's order in the world and everything has to be just right for these occasions. And now it looks like there's an afterlife. You put that all together, you're starting to get a picture that's looking like pretty interesting theology.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Yeah. Well, later in your chapter, you distinguish between acts taking place in this world, in NDEs, that can be independently corroborated and also acts that take place in a heavenly or other world or realm. Why is that an important distinction here when you're studying the scientific case for these?

Gary Habermas:

Yeah, because I don't trust the latter. I don't trust the latter, whether they're by Christians or non-Christians. Now, for example, people can say, "I had this wonderful feeling. I felt just fantastic. I wanted to go back there. I didn't even want to return." Well, "That's cool. I'm not going to question your emotions." But there's no evidence that you had a description with an angel, let's say, or you met Jesus." And in one recent book that just came out, NDEers, of all the religious figures in the world, NDEers see Jesus more frequently than any other person. 20% of NDEers in this study, which is published, 20% of NDEers or see Jesus and the other religions, as I recall, there were no more than three reports of a Buddhist person, a Hindu person, anybody else, no more than three. But if Jesus is 20%, there were a hundred NDE cases, so Jesus was seen 20 times.

And the nearest in the other religious founder was three times. So that says something about Christianity, but I don't use that as a reason because if you say, "I had a discussion with Jesus and he said to me, this is not your time. I'm sending you back. Someday you'll be here, but until then, goodbye," and you're back in your body. Well, how do I confirm a heavenly discussion or for that matter, discussion of hell, about 20% of near death experiences are hell cases. I should explain that either hell or something very, very, very uncomfortable. It could be depression, big time depression or anxiety or fear, but it could be like a hell like environment, like a burning, like a fire, just like you read about in the Bible. And someone could say, "Oh, that's because you were raised that way." Well, that's my problem.

I can't verify heavenly discussions or heavenly sights. So the kind of NDE data I'm talking about virtually always occur on this earth in normal kind of situation. I've used examples like parking lots, in your home, two miles away, normal earthly situations. That's where the evidence comes from.

Andrew McDiarmid:

And it would seem that a lot of naturalists or those looking for naturalistic explanations are ultimately gunning for religion. It's the religion part they don't like about NDEs. And so that's nice about the study of these is you can separate the corroboration of certain things versus things that you can't corroborate. And I think that's an important distinction to make. In fact, Michael Saban, a fellow NDE researcher has said that religious beliefs appear to affect the interpretation, but not the content of the near death experience.

Gary Habermas:

Yeah, he's a cardiologist. He used to teach at Emory University in Atlanta, then he went into private practice. I know Mike real well, and he's a really committed Christian too. In the old days when NDE research first started, he was one of the "big five." There were five scholars who were very well known in those early days, and he was one of the first of the five guys that published this. And he published the first book, and some still say the best book on a medical investigation of NDEs where you scientifically look at it. And he gave I think six evidential cases. But he's got six cases in that book. One person read a dial on the machine in their room, but when you're out and the thing is up behind your head and you're lying down on the bed, face up the machine's behind you, you can't read. You're out. They're cutting you. You're out. You can't tell him what the dial on the machine said, but that was one of his five.

But you think about that he did five. And now this article I did years ago for Blackwell, and then this one I did for Discover over 300 then and probably 350 or 400 now. They make Mike Saban's six look like nothing. And Mike would probably say that too. So we just have a lot of evidence. And to me, the only thing that makes sense that there's so many evidences from so many angles about the only thing that makes sense is for the skeptic to say something like, "Well, you're just kind of manby pamby. You'll believe anything. You just got soft emotions." I'm a hard case. I don't believe that stuff. All you're telling me is that you don't want to believe it. That's all.

Your comment that made it sound like you're a tough guy and everybody else is like a feelings person. Philosophically, you're telling me about your worldview. You're telling me about the way you think the world is, and if you think there's nothing supernatural in the world, well, you go right on having that belief, you're not going to change this NDE evidence. But a lot of people who say they don't believe it are people who don't want it to be true. They don't want God to pick one example. They don't want there to be a God that has a claim on their life and asks them what they were doing during their life. They don't want to be a part of that. So many, many times the deniers are people who just say, Yeah, whatever." But the point is they cannot explain the data from dozens of positions and in and out of the room and blind and these twilight zone healthy person goes with them.

And the ones where you meet a deceased person, you can go to their grave and see the place where they're buried. And your testimony is, "You say it was your father." "Yeah. Okay. Well, you tell me who it is." When I got this information from him and when it was over, I went out and checked it out. It was true. Now who looks like they're telling the truth?

Andrew McDiarmid:

And it's certainly that verifiable objective data that strengthens the scientific case for near death experiences.

Gary Habermas:

Exactly.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Well, one or two questions as we wrap up. Did you participate in the Angel Studios documentary feature film After Death that's coming out?

Gary Habermas:

Actually, I think I did. To say I think I did sounds kind of weird. I did two movies recently. I was a part of each one. One on near death experiences and one on the Shroud of Turin, and I'm pretty sure the one was the Angels publication. In fact, my wife and I are planning to go see the movie this week. It comes to our town, to our movie theater.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Okay. Well, in general, this is my final question. Why is it important to share with the wider public the evidence for afterlife consciousness?

Gary Habermas:

Well, I think for a lot of reasons, the afterlife is very, very important. And if there's an afterlife, especially, you could see it in simplistic terms where there could be a bad place and a good place, call it whatever you want, describe it however you want, I don't believe the descriptions. I talked to an angel. Jesus said I'd come back in 20 years. I don't believe those kind of reports because I have no way to verify them. I only believe what I can verify. However, if there's an afterlife of some sort and people want to believe in an afterlife, it not only is a fascinating view. I mean, how many things on your list would be higher that you'd like to know about than afterlife. But secondly, it's a question that gets going in your own life.

What if a person gets really convicted, realizes I'm an agnostic or a non-Christian, somehow I'm an atheist, but now all this evidence, I can't refuse it. Now, there's an afterlife. Well, I better start paying attention to the world religions and where I ought to go and where the evidence is because I better get ready for this event before it happens. So it's such a momentous thing. Who doesn't want to live forever? It's such a momentous possibility that it can lead a person onto a path of discovery and research on their own and going where they think the evidence leads.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Yeah. Well, I want to thank you for your time and sharing your insights and the research and this awesome chapter you've contributed.

Gary Habermas:

Well, thank you. I appreciate that. I enjoy doing it, and I'm glad they did it. I've got to do another one for another book coming up pretty soon. It's another Blackwell book. So that would be three detailed articles. That's just an example. These things are popping up and people want to do interviews and people want me to write. I'm an editor, by the way, for the review editor for the Journal of Near Death Studies, which is, I think they claim the only peer reviewed near death journal in the world that comes out of University of Virginia School of Medicine, I think is where it was born. So it's got all the credentials of a really good research report, and I've been an editor there for, I don't even know, over 10 years. And so they're just out there and you come into a lot of detail. I think it's just an exciting area, and I want to keep the ball rolling. So thank you for doing the interview.

Andrew McDiarmid:



Absolutely. And if listeners are interested in more of your work, they can access it at your website, [garyhabermas.com](http://garyhabermas.com), [garyhabermas.com](http://garyhabermas.com). And folks, if you're interested in this book, it's an awesome array of perspectives on the mind/body issue. You can get more information at [discovery.org](http://discovery.org). Just type in Minding the Brain, and you'll get free chapter excerpts, endorsements, and of course links to purchase your own copy.

Announcer:

This has been Mind Matters News. Explore more at [mindmatters.ai](http://mindmatters.ai). That's [mindmatters.ai](http://mindmatters.ai) Mind Matters News is directed and edited by Austin Egbert. The opinions expressed on this program are solely those of the speakers. Mind Matters News is produced and copyrighted by the Walter Bradley Center for Natural and Artificial Intelligence at Discovery Institute.