

Clayton King and his fantastic world of death, drownings and disembowelments

I once heard of a seminary professor who told his class of aspiring pastors that whenever a preacher starts a sermon with a personal story, he starts his sermon with a lie. It's hyperbole, but it makes a good point: when preachers base their spiritual lessons on personal stories, we have a problem if those stories aren't true.

I had the occasion a couple of weeks ago to hear some friends talking about some of the remarkable stories from Clayton King's 2010 book, *Dying to Live: Abandoning Yourself to God's Bold Paradox*. My friends had read a couple of amazing stories from King's book, were quite shaken by them, and incorporated them into a devotional based on King's teaching.

The problem was, what they were reading wasn't true.

The Sadistic SEALs

In Chapter 12, entitled *Suffering for a Purpose*, King recounts a meeting with a man purporting to be a Navy SEAL who tells him the following:

The man told me that they would deny this, but he claimed he was locked in a casket and buried alive, underground, where he remained for 24 hours with no food, water, light, or movement. This exercise in mental suffering was designed to make him tough, to teach him to discipline his mind and the thoughts he was thinking when death seemed imminent and rescue unlikely. It also forced his mind to exercise authority over his body by telling his muscles not to cramp and his heart rate not to jump, avoiding the onset of panic, which would bring on hyperventilation and possibly even cardiac arrest. (p. 100)

By prefacing the story with "they would deny this," the story becomes conveniently irrefutable. In a case like this, King ought to have scrutinized the man's claim carefully. Although he explains in some detail what the purpose of this exercise is, there's no evidence that King ever considered whether this was even possible. Because being buried alive is a familiar theme in horror movies, the question of how long one could

survive is one that has been quite well studied. [Popular Mechanics](#) concluded that no man can survive in a buried coffin for more than about two hours, not even a Navy SEAL.

Although King couched the burial story as a claim from his friend, the next astonishing detail comes from King himself.

The final challenge came when each recruit was thrown into frigid water, held under by the other recruits, and drowned when their lungs filled with water. Then it was the job of the rest of the team to revive and resuscitate the recruit. To join this elite unit, you had to **literally die** and be brought back to life. (p. 100-101) [Emphasis added]

To be clear, King is talking about real death, not just soldiers passing out. He believes, and would have us believe, that the U.S. military actually kills its own people. Even more remarkably, the SEALs have a fail-proof technique of resuscitating drowning victims. This is a real scandal, if true. Why hasn't our government passed these skills on to life guards, who could be saving so many more lives each year than they already do? Actually, if you can resuscitate someone after pulling him from the water, he *nearly* drowned. If he actually drowned, he's dead, and there's no coming back from that, no matter how skilled his helpers.

Now, perhaps King got confused about the actual SEALs' practice of [drown-proofing](#) their soldiers, during which some of them pass out. Those that do are rescued *before they drown* by attendants with scuba equipment, after which some are given another chance. If they continue to pass out, they [fail the test](#) and don't become SEALs.

The problem with reality is that it contradicts King's thesis. Fantasy fits his spiritual lesson much better.

If King's readers don't stop reading after the SEALs story, they have an even better story in store in his penultimate chapter.

The Indestructible Indian Preacher

The Paul Prasad story, which unfolds over four consecutive Sundays, ought to be a

movie, if true. Here's how Clayton King says it went down:

Week 1

Outraged that Pastor Paul Prasad, from a conveniently ambiguous “large city in India,” is baptizing converts, Hindu extremists stop by his church and tell him, “as a courtesy” that he wasn't welcome in the city. After the sermon, they take him out into the street and beat him until he is bruised and bloodied. He's also told that if he comes back next week, the men will kill him.

King explains how baptism, which he calls the “final step in a total conversion,” is an extremely profound step because these new converts are dying to their old, unconverted families. Only brave pastors and brave new converts dare participate in baptism.

Week 2

Prasad, undeterred by the threat, returns the next Sunday to preach. The Hindu thugs wait in the back of the church and take him out into the street again, this time beating him so badly that they break his bones. Prasad's own congregation stood back and watched without offering help, we're told, “for the fear of the fate that would await them, the same fate he was suffering” (p. 151).

At this point, the story remains credible. [Voice of the Martyrs has documented](#) instances of Indian Christians being beaten and murdered by Hindu extremists, just as King is claiming here. I do wonder, however, what happened to the congregation who were apparently brave enough to die through baptism, but not brave enough to protect their pastor from a few unarmed thugs, especially when the congregation had to have known that the threat was coming.

Week 3

His broken bones treated, Prasad returns to preach, and the same men stand in the back of the church waiting to punish him after the service. This time, they're really serious.

They stripped him naked to embarrass and shame him, an unthinkable

experience for anyone in Indian culture but particularly for a man. Then they opened his mouth and poured battery acid down his throat. While several men held him down, another man pummeled him in the stomach to make him swallow the acid. The flesh inside his mouth, his gums, his throat and esophagus, were all scorched and burned raw.

Then they took a long metal rod with a razor-sharp pointed end. And without going into detail, by the time they were finished with Pastor Paul, he was lying on the street with his intestines beside him, on the ground, outside of his body. They had disemboweled this man simply for proclaiming the gospel. They left him lying in his own blood and waste, certain he would die in a matter of moments.
(p. 152)

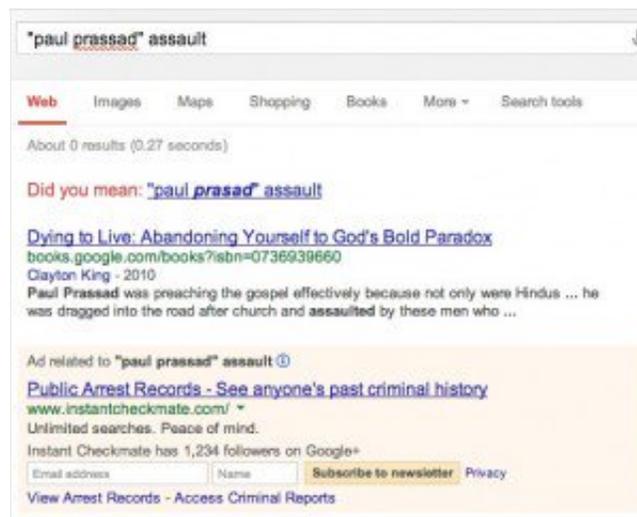
Prasad survives by having his intestines removed and having a colostomy bag attached to his side. King explains that the miracle was because the grace of the gospel had changed Prasad “to such a degree that the option of dying [was] simply not on the table, because it would leave unfinished the work of preaching the love of God to those who need it most.”

Some questions:

1. **Where were the police?** Apparently this was a large city with a modern-enough hospital to treat Prasad and return him to work the next week (see Week 4), but the church didn't ask the police for help. After two weeks of assaults, Prasad and his congregation knew who these people were.
2. **Why, again, did the congregation stand by and let their pastor suffer this?** If they're brave enough to be baptized, which is King's point here, why won't they risk life and limb for their pastor? As far as I can tell by reading the story, the congregation vastly outnumbered the criminals.
3. **What's so special about masculine nudity?** Are Indian women not ashamed to be stripped naked in public? King's sensitivity to this seems more personal than logical.
4. **How did he survive the battery acid?** The [National Institutes of Health](#) advise that swallowing battery acid to the extent that Prasad did would require the

removal of his stomach and esophagus, if he survived it at all. He wouldn't be preaching the next week (see Week 4), no matter how much he wanted to.

5. **How did he survive the disembowelment?** Although partial disembowelment can be survived in some instances, the total evisceration that King describes is the stuff of historical torture and execution.
6. **Why don't we find this story anywhere else?** You'd expect that this event would become legendary, though the only place I can find this story, or even a Pastor Prasad who might have done this, is in King's book, which itself doesn't provide any further documentation of the story. A Google search shows how little remarked on this remarkable story is. Bing returned a completely empty page. King met Prasad in 1997, and the assault would have had to be before that, so perhaps this anonymous city's newspapers weren't online yet. Even so, it's the kind of story that you'd expect would be retold by Indian Christians online for centuries, if true.



A Google search for “Paul Prasad” and assault turns up almost empty.

7. **What was God's purpose in this miracle?** King's explanation for the miraculous survival seems to contradict his central thesis, that Prasad was willing to die for proclaiming his faith; instead, we learn that he had such a will to live so he could keep preaching that he refused to die. Why did God need Prasad so badly that he was able to get up and walk away, in contrast to all the eviscerated Christian martyrs through the ages who perished in terrible pain? Didn't God also need those saints to keep preaching? Why was Prasad so special, especially now that he seems to have vanished after this amazing miracle? What a waste. If this really happened, for the sake of God's glory this miraculous sign should be publicized well beyond

Week 4

Undeterred after losing his throat, esophagus, stomach, and the rest of his digestive tract, and with bones freshly broken from just two weeks earlier, Pastor Prasad decides to preach the very next Sunday. How he had a voice, we're not told. How he got out of the hospital so soon, we're not told. How the men who had attempted to murder him were still at large and confident enough to turn up in his church again, we're not told. Why his congregation didn't stay home hiding in shame for their passivity over the last three weeks, we're not told. Why the congregation didn't restrain the Hindu gang on their fourth visit to the church, we're not told.

Instead, King tells us the inspirational story of one of the gang calling out during Prasad's preaching and asking to be saved and baptized.

The man walked forward in utter brokenness, and Paul was able to embrace one of the very people who just a week earlier had forced him to death's door. They stood weeping and praying together as the Hindu became a Christian. He had received forgiveness. (p. 153)

They stood and embraced. With broken bones. With a fresh new colostomy. With the top half of his digestive tract burned, and the bottom half gone.

Incredible.

Unbelievable.

Why This Matters

Truth

The blurb on the back of King's book promises "20 bold pictures from Scripture, his own life, and the lives of others that will ... grip your soul with longing for the life Jesus promised [and] stir up your passion for God's mission." I've shown you that two of those pictures are false. There's also a third fictional picture about a wealthy depressed woman and a psychiatrist who prescribes community service for her (p. 128). Although King

introduces the account as a story he'd read, suggesting it might be fiction, four pages later he concludes with "It worked," and tells his readers that Jesus wants them to live a life of service as well.

Whenever King paints a picture from others' lives, we're too often seeing mirages. From these, King expects us to learn life-changing spiritual lessons.

Credibility

The same blurb that promised the 20 bold pictures describes King as a "pastor, evangelist, missionary, and author ... dedicated to proclaiming the gospel and making disciples... [who] has spoken to millions of people in 30-plus countries." Millions of people have looked to King to speak truth and provide spiritual guidance. How are we supposed to determine what parts of King's messages are true, and which are fables?

If you've ever heard a King sermon, he seems to spend most of his time talking about Clayton King. In his book, he does too, but adds a few stories from others. In at least three instances, they are false. If we can't trust his printed and verifiable stories about others, how can we possibly trust him to be telling the truth when he tells all the fantastic stories from his own life where he's the only available witness?

Discipline

A preacher's or author's propensity for invention or exaggeration only matters to the extent that his sermons or books stray from Scripture. Why does King feel a need to fill his sermons with so much extraneous material from his and others' lives? Doesn't he think that Scripture is sufficient for supporting its own teaching? When you construct moral lessons from the fictional experiences of Navy SEALs or Indian martyrs, you're offering no higher truth than you can find anywhere else in our fallen culture. Self sacrifice, the topic of King's book, has been a staple of religion, philosophy, martial arts and politics for millennia. Why not show how the Biblical idea of self-sacrifice differs from everyone else by focusing exclusively on Scripture?

Paul told Timothy to [preach the word](#), not to preach interesting personal anecdotes.

What Now?

Accusing an author of inventing facts is a serious business, so before writing this I contacted King and asked if he could provide support for these claims, or, failing that, if he had retracted them. Having received no response, I assume that he cannot defend his claims. I hope that he will use his own blog to clear this up, as is customary when authors have their work publicly challenged. Perhaps [his publisher](#) will provide a response. I am ready to change my mind on the veracity of these stories, especially the Prasad story (it would be amazing and wonderful if this actually happened), though for now I'm convinced that the story is untrue.