

John  
MacArthur

THE

Word

OF

HEAVEN

*The Truth About Heaven, Angels, and Eternal Life*

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**Erwin W. Lutzer**, Senior Pastor, The Moody Church, Chicago, Illinois

# The Glory of Heaven

*The Truth about Heaven, Angels, and Eternal Life*

Second Edition

With New Material Addressing the  
Current Debate and Issues

**John MacArthur**

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# Introduction

According to a 2007 Gallup poll, 81 percent of adult Americans say they believe in heaven.<sup>1</sup> That's a significant increase from just ten years earlier, when a similar poll revealed that only 72 percent believed in heaven.<sup>2</sup> Nearly 80 percent of those questioned in the 2007 poll also said they believe they will be admitted to heaven when they die. In other words, a very large majority of people believe in heaven, and almost everyone who believes in heaven expects to go there in the afterlife.

But here's a stunning irony: While interest in heaven is rapidly rising, belief in God is steadily declining. During the same decade bookended by those two Gallup polls, atheism was gaining unprecedented popularity,<sup>3</sup> and record numbers of people now say they regard the Bible as nothing more than a book of fables and legends.<sup>4</sup>

It is no secret that several very powerful secularizing influences are currently at work in Western culture. The media, governments, the academic community, and the entertainment industry—all the primary shapers of society's values—have more or less banded together against the God of Scripture. They promote a materialistic worldview while relentlessly attacking historic Christian belief and biblical morality. The resulting cultural drift has been significant. As a matter of fact, belief in God declined by four percentage points in just six years' time between the start of the new millennium and that 2007 poll—

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<sup>1</sup>Gallup poll, May 10–13, 2007.

<sup>2</sup>Gallup/Nathan Cummings Foundation and Fetzer Institute Poll, May 1997.

<sup>3</sup>Greg Paul, "Atheism on the Upswing in America," *The Washington Post*, September 20, 2011.

<sup>4</sup>Gallup poll, May 5–8, 2011. See also Jeffrey M. Jones, "In U.S., 3 in 10 Say They Take the Bible Literally," July 8, 2011 at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/148427/say-bible-literally.aspx>.

even though there was a sharp increase in the number of people who say they believe in heaven and expect to go there. As I write these words, none of those trends has shown any signs of losing steam.<sup>5</sup>

Incidentally, nearly a third of those questioned in Gallup's 2007 poll said they don't believe in hell or aren't sure about it. Roughly the same number say they doubt the existence of the devil.

Given the rising tides of militant atheism, postmodern skepticism, biblical illiteracy, self-love, and gross immorality, what are we to make of the current interest in heaven? One thing is clear: it does not signal any significant upsurge of interest in what *biblical* revelation teaches about heaven. On the contrary, the data actually seem to indicate that lots of people are simply making up whatever concept of heaven pleases them. The ideas about heaven that get the most press are mostly figments of the human imagination that bear little (if any) resemblance to that glorious realm of Christ's kingdom as it is described in God's Word.

We would of course expect New Age practitioners, cranks, and cultists to abandon the Bible in favor of their own dreams and fantasies. But this trend of inventing one's own personal concept of heaven seems to be an even bigger problem in the evangelical community than it is in the world at large. Evidence of this can be seen in several recent evangelical mega-best sellers.

One of the most talked-about books of 2011 was *Heaven Is for Real*, by Todd Burpo with Lynn Vincent.<sup>6</sup> The book recounts four-year-old Colton Burpo's vision of heaven (as told by his father to Ms. Vincent). Colton claims he visited heaven during surgery after a burst appendix nearly took his life. His stories of heaven are full of fanciful features and peculiar details that bear all the earmarks of a child's vivid imagination. There's nothing transcendent or even particularly enlightening about Colton's description of heaven. In fact, it is completely devoid of the breathtaking glory featured in every biblical description of the heavenly realm. That doesn't deter Todd Burpo from singling out selective phrases and proof texts from Scripture, citing them as if they authenticated his son's account.

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<sup>5</sup>Those same trends are likewise seen in data from polls conducted in 2003 and 2011 by the Barna Research Group.

<sup>6</sup>*Heaven Is for Real: A Little Boy's Astounding Story of His Trip to Heaven and Back* (Nashville: Nelson, 2010).

An article in the *New York Times Magazine* chronicled the book's success:

“Heaven Is for Real” was published in late 2010, became a word-of-mouth best seller and has spent 59 (nonconsecutive) weeks as the No. 1 nonfiction paperback on The New York Times's best-seller list. Recently the publisher, Thomas Nelson, spun off a children's picture book, now also a best seller, with illustrations verified by Colton. And sometime in 2014, courtesy of DeVon Franklin, vice president of production at Columbia Pictures, who considers his faith “a professional asset,” a movie version should be released in theaters.<sup>7</sup>

Televangelist T. D. Jakes will coproduce the movie.

Another blockbuster book in the same genre is *To Heaven and Back*, by Mary C. Neal, MD.<sup>8</sup> Dr. Neal's account of heaven is no less jejune than Colton Burpo's, and it is even more doctrinally deviant. Released at the end of May 2012, this book reached the top of the *New York Times* best-seller list in its first month.

In chapter 2, we'll look a little more closely at the story told in *Heaven Is for Real*. Then in a series of appendixes we'll examine Neal's story and some other popular books in the same genre. But my point here is merely to note the disturbing ease with which imaginary tales like those gain traction and garner passionate followers among evangelical readers. These are not books any reputable evangelical publisher would have given a second glance to just twenty years ago. At the moment, however, Christian booksellers are publishing and selling more books filled with false visions of the afterlife than all the commentaries and Bible reference works combined.<sup>9</sup>

It may be quite fascinating to read these intricately detailed accounts of people who claim to have come back from heaven, but the hobby is as dangerous as it is seductive. Readers not only get a twisted,

<sup>7</sup>Maud Newton, “My Son Went to Heaven, and All I Got Was a No. 1 Best Seller,” *New York Times Magazine*, April 27, 2012.

<sup>8</sup>Mary C. Neal, *To Heaven and Back: A Doctor's Extraordinary Account of Her Death, Heaven, Angels, and Life Again* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook, 2012).

<sup>9</sup>According to statistics from the publisher, *Heaven Is for Real* sold more than 7 million copies within 18 months of its release (not counting more than a half million copies of the Children's Edition). *To Heaven and Back* is on track to exceed that. Don Piper's 2004 book *90 Minutes in Heaven* sold 4 million copies—a phenomenal success that no doubt opened the doors for these later projects. In summer 2012, while two of those books were still riding high on the *New York Times* list, *The KJV Standard Lesson Commentary* was the only biblical reference work that even made the top fifty on the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association's best-seller list.

unbiblical picture of heaven from these tall tales; they also imbibe a subjective, superstitious, shallow brand of spirituality. There is no reason to believe anyone who claims to have gone to heaven and returned (John 3:13; 1:18). Studying mystical accounts of supposed journeys into the afterlife yields nothing but confusion, contradiction, false hope, bad doctrine, and a host of similar evils.

Nevertheless, the current popularity of such books shows how hungry people are to hear about heaven. There is nothing inherently wrong with that, of course. In fact, it is a desire that can be harnessed for good, as long as we look to Scripture and let God's Word inform our knowledge and shape our hopes.

Indeed, it is right and beneficial for Christians to fix their hearts on heaven. Scripture repeatedly urges us to cultivate that perspective: "If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth" (Colossians 3:1–2). "We look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:18). "Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ" (Philippians 3:20).

Such a perspective is the very essence of true faith, according to Hebrews 11. Those with authentic, biblical faith acknowledge that they are strangers and pilgrims on this earth (v. 13). They are seeking a heavenly homeland (v. 14). They "desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city" (v. 16). The "city" that verse refers to is the heavenly Jerusalem, an unimaginable place—the very capital of heaven. It will be the eternal abode of the redeemed. No wonder Christians are intrigued with the subject.

The truth is, practically everyone (including the hardened atheist) *thinks* of heaven, imagines what it might be like, and wishes to be there. God inscribed such a longing into the very soul of humanity. "He has put eternity into man's heart" (Ecclesiastes 3:11). The truth of that verse is evident, even in a secularized, skeptical society such as ours.

Almost half a century ago, theologian Wilbur Smith (then professor of biblical studies at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School) wrote an

excellent book on heaven in which he lamented the decline of interest in heavenly things and a corresponding preoccupation with worldly things. It was the late 1960s. Decades of modernist rationalism had left mainline churches spiritually bankrupt. People of that generation were enjoying a level of material prosperity their parents and grandparents never dreamed of. The public and the media were obsessed with politics, sports, entertainment, and other earthly things—and perhaps less concerned about spiritual matters than any generation in history.

Wilbur Smith began by noting that “only two really significant volumes on Heaven have been published in the last quarter century.”<sup>10</sup> His book’s first chapter was titled, “The Repudiation of the Idea of Heaven in Modern Thought.”<sup>11</sup> He cited some well-known shapers of modern philosophy, including Friedrich Nietzsche, who boasted that his philosophy had finally killed God, and Karl Marx, who declared that the proper role of philosophy is to abolish religion and establish the truth of *this world*. He also quoted Vladimir Lenin, who cited Marx’s famous dictum “Religion is the opium of the people.” Lenin then likewise labeled the hope of heaven “a spiritual intoxicant, in which the slaves of capital drown their humanity and blunt their desires for some sort of decent [earthly] existence.”<sup>12</sup>

Smith then went on to demonstrate how most fields of modern thought are overtly hostile to the very concept of heaven. *Science*, for example, has no means to investigate anything beyond the natural realm. Unfortunately, many scientists draw the false corollary that the natural realm is all there is. *Philosophy*, says Smith, “never did have a place for Heaven.” (He quotes philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, who wrote, “Can you imagine anything more appallingly idiotic than the Christian idea of heaven?”<sup>13</sup>) Worst of all, modern *theology*, influenced by liberalism and rationalism, also abandoned the concept of heaven, joining other branches of modern thought in labeling it “superstition, a myth, an outworn concept.”<sup>14</sup>

Today intellectual Sadduceeism is even more virulent (and certainly

<sup>10</sup> Wilbur M. Smith, *The Biblical Doctrine of Heaven* (Chicago: Moody, 1968), 7.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

more shrill) than when Smith made those observations. Worldliness and materialism have become the hallmarks of postmodern culture. And yet it is rather amazing that all those trends combined have not managed to quell the human longing for heaven's glory and faith's assurance. Although people have been told relentlessly by the intellectual elite that there is no spiritual reality, that they evolved out of some primordial slime, and that they have no future in eternity—*they know better*. God has indeed put eternity in our hearts. Heaven *is* real, and it is human nature to long to be there.

The heart of our study together in this book will be an in-depth look at what the Bible says about heaven. No matter what one thinks about or wishes to imagine about heaven, the reality is different and better by magnitudes. You simply cannot gain a better understanding of heaven than we are given in Scripture—especially not from someone else's dreams and near-death experiences. In the words of Charles Spurgeon,

It's a little heaven below, to imagine sweet things. But never think that imagination can picture heaven. When it is most sublime, when it is freest from the dust of earth, when it is carried up by the greatest knowledge, and kept steady by the most extreme caution, imagination cannot picture heaven. "It hath not entered the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him." Imagination is good, but not to picture to us heaven. Your imaginary heaven you will find by-and-by to be all a mistake; though you may have piled up fine castles, you will find them to be castles in the air, and they will vanish like thin clouds before the gale. For imagination cannot make a heaven. "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath it entered the heart of man to conceive" it.<sup>15</sup>

What God has revealed in Scripture is the only legitimate place to get a clear understanding of the heavenly kingdom. This is a point we will come back to repeatedly: the Bible is our *only* reliable source of information about heaven. I want to show you why it is misleading and dangerous to probe and dissect people's near-death experiences, as if they could give us some important truth about the afterlife that we are lacking from Scripture.

<sup>15</sup>Charles H. Spurgeon, *The New Park Street Pulpit*, 6 vols. (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1856), 2:20-21.

I also want to show you what Scripture teaches about heaven, angels, and the afterlife. And together we will see that what the Bible says about these things is indeed *sufficient*—because we know Scripture furnishes us with everything we need to know to be equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:17). There’s nothing any eyewitness testimony could reliably add to that.

As we study what Scripture teaches, you’re going to see that God’s written Word does in fact give us a remarkably full and clear picture of heaven and the spiritual realm—but there are still many questions the Bible leaves unanswered. We need to accept the boundaries God himself has put on what he has revealed. It is sheer folly to speculate where Scripture is silent. It is sinfully wrong to try to investigate spiritual mysteries using occult means. And it is seriously dangerous to listen to anyone who claims to know more about God, heaven, angels, or the afterlife than God himself has revealed to us in Scripture.

When Scripture commands us to fix our hearts on heavenly things, it is teaching us that our focus should be on Christ, and on the true heavenly glory—not that we should immerse ourselves in fantasies about the heavenly life. Colossians 3:2—“Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth”—is simply another way of phrasing the first and great commandment: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30).

No matter how much they might obsess over what heaven is like, people who fill their heads with a lot of fantastic or delusional ideas from others’ near-death experiences have *not* truly set their minds on things above. If the inerrant biblical truth God has given us is the only reliable knowledge about heaven we have access to (and it is), then that is what should grip our hearts and minds. That, I hope, is the single most important message you will get from this book.

Now let’s see why the Bible’s account of heaven is so much better than the dreams and speculations of the human mind.



# Heavenly Hash

I know you have thought about heaven and imagined what it might be like. Everyone does. The hope of life hereafter is intrinsic to human thought. Together with our innate moral sense, our love of beauty, and our inclination to worship, our fascination with heaven sets humans apart from animals. All those characteristics stem from the fact that *we are spiritual creatures, made in the likeness of God*. That is the very thing that defines humanity itself and sets our race in a unique position above all the rest of creation (Genesis 1:26; 5:1; James 3:9). God himself “has put eternity into man’s heart” (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

In other words, the atheistic assertion that the end of this life means the end of one’s existence is contrary to human instinct. It is fundamentally inhuman—a denial of the human spirit.

Scripture expressly teaches that humanity was created with a native awareness of God. “What can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them” (Romans 1:19). A literal translation of the Greek text would be, “Something about God is clearly known within them.” Humans have an intuitive sense of God’s existence. We know something about his nature. God himself created us with that knowledge built in. And we sense our ultimate accountability to him.

To supplement that innate knowledge, God has put his glory on display for us in everything he has created. “His invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made” (Romans 1:20). That’s why no matter where we look in the vast universe, we see manifestations of God’s wisdom, power,

and greatness. Look through the most powerful telescope toward the outer edges of the universe, and you will be overwhelmed by infinite grandeur beyond your comprehension. Look at a drop of pond water through the finest microscope and you will likewise see intricate wonders that declare the inexpressible majesty and inexhaustible skill of our Creator. Either perspective—and every point of view in between—plainly reminds us of what we already know in our hearts and consciences: we were made by an unimaginably glorious God, and his plan for us is infinitely more expansive than this short earthly life.

All the atheist propaganda in the world cannot (and never will) eliminate humanity's innate knowledge about God, silence the testimony of creation, muzzle the human conscience, stifle that sense of eternity in the human heart, or quell our longing for heaven.

That explains why every major religion and every significant culture in the history of the human race has had some notion of perfect paradise—nirvana, Elysium, Valhalla, Utopia, Shangri-La, or whatever. But it doesn't explain why everyone seems to imagine heaven a little differently. Even those who claim to have been to heaven disagree among themselves about what it is like. If God built eternity into the human heart, why do different people have such different ideas about heaven?

### **Paradise Lost**

The answer to that question lies in the sad truth that we are fallen creatures, tainted with sin and guilt. Sin affects our thinking, our desires, our imagination, and most of all, our understanding of spiritual things. We cannot even reliably discern our own hearts: "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 17:9).

So while we intuitively sense the reality of heaven and are drawn to it, we also perceive our own fallenness and guilt. It is significant that the first thing Adam and Eve did after they ate the forbidden fruit was desperately try to cover their own nakedness and hide from God (Genesis 3:7–11). Their profound shame overwhelmed even their sense of God's wonder, so their instinct as fallen creatures was to try to evade God. By all that is rational and sensible, they ought to have been drawn to him, enthralled with his glory, and engulfed with love

and delight in his presence. Indeed, they *were* all those things—until the moment they disobeyed. But sin radically and instantly changed everything, and they irrationally tried to hide from the very One whom they most needed, the one true God who alone deserved their love and devotion.

All of humanity has been engaged in the same futile exercise ever since. We're born with a sinful bent. We feel the shame of our guilt. We know we are undeserving of God's benevolence. We are innately aware of (and alarmed by) his almighty power and infinite wisdom—and those truths are permanently written across creation lest we forget. We know we would have no valid argument or defense against the righteous wrath of the Almighty if we were summoned to stand alone before him in a court of perfect justice. "No creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account" (Hebrews 4:13). So fallen people inevitably try to suppress and twist what God has revealed to them (Romans 1:18).

The more people silence that innate knowledge of the Godhead, the more spiritually confused and wantonly sinful they will become. Romans 1:21–25 traces the descent of human depravity:

Although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

Don't miss the fact that when people deliberately suppress their knowledge of God and reject what he has revealed about himself, they do not normally deny the existence of God completely. Instead, they invent a god of their own who is more to their liking. The false worshiper realizes he cannot totally eliminate that inborn knowledge of God's existence without sacrificing some of his own humanity, so he opts instead to concoct a lesser god out of his own imagination, more suited to his personal tastes. Some crassly worship mere creatures

(even “birds and animals and creeping things”). Others make idols of stone or venerate fictional characters from human mythologies. Most nowadays simply envision a personal deity that is little more than a reflection of themselves. They may pretend—and even convince themselves—that they are paying homage to the God of Scripture, but in reality they are worshiping self. All of these are sinful forms of creature worship. One is no better or more sophisticated than the other, and none of them is any better than rank atheism.

In fact, false religion quite often turns out to be a more grotesque and more emphatic denial of the one true God than staunch atheism—because of the way man-made religion systematically twists and reimagines every spiritual truth.

What people believe about the afterlife is particularly susceptible to the corruption of false religion. People who invent their own gods must likewise invent their own heaven. That has suddenly become a very fashionable pastime, even among people who claim to believe in the God of the Bible.

### **Castles in the Clouds**

Several extremely imaginative accounts claiming to describe what heaven is like are currently riding high on the best-seller lists, and the pace of such publications seems to be increasing. Fanciful lore about people’s mystical visits to heaven (or hell, in some cases) constitute a new and fairly large category in publishing today: travelogues for the afterlife. Tim Challies, prolific evangelical blogger and book-review specialist, refers to the new genre as “heaven tourism” and says this:

Travelling to heaven and back is where it’s at today. DON PIPER spent ninety minutes there and sold four million copies of his account. COLTON BURPO doesn’t know how long he was there, but his travel diary has surpassed 6 million copies sold, with a kids’ edition accounting for another half million. BILL WIESE obviously booked his trip on the wrong web site and found himself in hell, which did, well, hellish things to his sales figures. Still, *23 Minutes in Hell* sold better than if he had described a journey to, say, Detroit, and he even saw his book hit the bestseller lists for a few weeks. There have been others as well, and together they have established afterlife travel journals as a whole new

genre in Christian publishing—a genre that is selling like hotcakes, or Amish fiction, for that.<sup>1</sup>

Actually, books like those have been a staple in secular publishing since the 1970s. Evangelical booksellers have been somewhat slow to follow the trend. But now they seem to be making up for it in high volume and heavy sales.

### **“Medical” Researchers Begin Probing the Afterlife**

The reading public’s fascination with heavenly excursions and near-death experiences really began in earnest shortly after the publication of Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’s 1969 book *On Death and Dying*.<sup>2</sup> Kübler-Ross was a Swiss American psychiatrist who in the 1960s made a study of terminally ill patients. She is famous for her theory that there are five stages of grief.

Along with her ideas about grieving she also recounted tales from several people who, it seemed, had literally been brought back from the dead—mostly resuscitated by surgeons in operating rooms or by paramedics at accident scenes. Many had fascinating tales to tell about what they supposedly saw and experienced on the “other side.”

Kübler-Ross decided to investigate further into the phenomenon of near-death experiences, and she said the study altered her own views of the afterlife. Before doing research for *On Death and Dying*, she was a rationalistic skeptic, believing that only oblivion followed death. She later wrote, “When I started this work, I must say, I was neither very interested in life after death nor did I have any really clear picture about the definition of death.”<sup>3</sup> But hearing about people’s near-death experiences made her a believer in the supernatural, she said.

About five years after Kübler-Ross published that first best seller on dying, another leading academic researcher specializing in near-death experiences rose to prominence. Like Kübler-Ross, Raymond A. Moody was a medical doctor with an interest in human psychology.

<sup>1</sup>Tim Challies, “Heaven Tourism,” blogpost June 18, 2012, at <http://www.challies.com/articles/heaven-tourism>.

<sup>2</sup>Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1969).

<sup>3</sup>Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Life after Death* (Berkeley, CA: Celestial Arts, 1991), 40.

He was making a study on how people cope with the reality of death. Moody's first book on the subject was *Life after Life*,<sup>4</sup> and it became a huge best-seller shortly after its release in 1975.

Moody's book chronicled more than a hundred cases of people who were clinically dead but then revived. In his recounting of their stories, virtually all of Moody's subjects described some kind of positive, enlightening, comforting, or simply peaceful experience on the other side of death.

Suddenly, it seemed, much of the world was obsessed with back-from-the-dead testimonies. What might these near-death experiences in the hands of scientific researchers tell us about the afterlife? More and more people claiming to have experienced heavenly phenomena came forward to tell their stories. Raymond Moody followed the success of his first volume with a series of sequels over the next decade and a half: *Reflections on Life after Life*; *The Light Beyond*; *Coming Back*; and *Reunions: Visionary Encounters with Departed Loved Ones*.<sup>5</sup>

### **Sentimentalizing Human Mortality and Toying with Gnosticism**

Such a sudden keen interest in life after death might sound like an encouraging trend. It started, after all, with two scholars who claimed impeccable academic and medical credentials, working independently of one another, ostensibly using scientific research methods. Kübler-Ross had studied psychiatry under some of Europe's most prestigious practitioners at the University of Zurich. She was teaching in the University of Chicago's medical school when she published her landmark work. The year after her first book was published, she lectured on human immortality at Harvard. Raymond Moody had earned one PhD in psychology from the University of Virginia and another from the University of West Georgia. He also earned his MD; he had worked as a forensic psychiatrist; and he taught medical students at major universities in Georgia and Nevada.

Had these esteemed doctors finally discovered the nexus of spirituality and science?

<sup>4</sup>Raymond A. Moody, *Life after Life* (New York: Mockingbird, 1975; and Bantam, 1976).

<sup>5</sup>Raymond A. Moody, *Reflections on Life after Life* (New York: Mockingbird, 1977); *The Light Beyond* (New York: Bantam, 1989); *Coming Back: A Psychiatrist Explores Past-Life Journeys* (New York: Bantam, 1990); *Reunions: Visionary Encounters with Departed Loved Ones* (New York: Villard, 1993).

Hardly. To begin with, neither Elisabeth Kübler-Ross nor Raymond Moody had any regard for the authority of Scripture; and as they delved more deeply into people's near-death experiences, both of these esteemed doctors eventually spurned science as well. They frivolously embraced medieval superstition instead. The ongoing influence of their writings actually signifies a serious setback for both faith and reason.

Accepting the reality of supernatural things is not the same as believing the truth. When an unbelieving mind rejects the authority of Scripture but embraces the reality of the supernatural realm, the result is always catastrophic.

Both Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and Raymond Moody became living illustrations of that principle. Both said they began their research on near-death experiences as scientific rationalists, convinced that there must be some perfectly reasonable natural explanation for the strange sensations reported by dying people. But both of them soon abandoned their agnostic materialism for something even worse.

Kübler-Ross gradually veered off into the world of New Age occultism. After publishing her study of others' near-death experiences, she reported that she herself had been through a rather remarkable out-of-body experience where she traveled at the speed of light. She began experimenting with séances to contact the dead. She became a leading voice in the New Age movement. At one point she joined a bizarre religious cult led by Jay Barham, a blatant charlatan who claimed to be able to make spirits materialize in order to have sex with the living.<sup>6</sup> Kübler-Ross's drift into the occult soon led to a divorce and the loss of her reputation in the scientific world. ("Some began to wonder about her mental health.")<sup>7</sup>

Kübler-Ross came to believe "that the physical body is only the house or the temple, or as we call it the cocoon, which we inhabit for a certain number of months or years until we make the transition called death. Then, at the time of death, we shed this cocoon and are once again as free as a butterfly."<sup>8</sup>

It wasn't long before the world's most famous secular authority on

<sup>6</sup>"The conversion of Kübler-Ross: From Thanatology to Séances and Sex," *Time*, November 12, 1979, 81.

<sup>7</sup>Christopher Reed, "Obituary: Elisabeth Kübler-Ross," *The Guardian*, August 30, 2004.

<sup>8</sup>Kübler-Ross, *On Life after Death*, 40.

death and dying actually began questioning the reality of death itself. Kübler-Ross finally concluded that “there was no death, there were only ‘transitions’ from one permeable boundary to another.”<sup>9</sup> As she grew more outspoken and more eccentric with these New Age–style beliefs, academic and scientific critics began to point out that even her best-known early works were not really objective scientific or scholarly studies to begin with. They were simply anecdotal accounts told with copious amounts of credulity and speculation, carefully wrapped in clinical-sounding language to give the appearance of academic legitimacy. But as Kübler-Ross immersed herself more deeply into occult and New Age thought, her reputation in the academic and scientific worlds gradually diminished. She was partially paralyzed by repeated strokes in the mid-1990s and died in 2004 in an Arizona care facility.

Nevertheless, to this day the influence of her work—particularly her gullible fascination with near-death experiences—strongly permeates the popular Western perspective on death and the afterlife.

In an article reviewing the life and eccentricities of Ms. Kübler-Ross, a writer in *Slate* noted that her work sparked “a kind of cult-like reverence for the allegedly superior truth-telling wisdom of the dying. . . . It’s a sentimentalizing of mortality that’s become incorporated into popular culture and can be seen as the source of such death-obsessed dramas as *Touched by an Angel* and *Dead Like Me*.”<sup>10</sup> That is quite an insightful observation. One of the great dangers of these back-from-the-dead testimonies is that readers tend to romanticize the experience and impute otherworldly wisdom to the person who is making the claims.

What I have just described is actually a gnostic way of thinking. *Gnosticism* was a sub-Christian heresy (a whole class of diverse cults, really) that rose to prominence the second century and competed with early Christianity for at least four centuries. Remnants of gnostic belief have survived and bred and resurfaced frequently ever since. The current fascination with near-death experiences is a classic example of gnostic thought that has been revived and retooled for the New Age.

The distinctive claim of every gnostic belief system is that true

<sup>9</sup>Ron Rosenbaum, “Dead Like Her: How Elisabeth Kübler-Ross Went around the Bend,” *Slate*, September 23, 2004.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*

enlightenment comes from some source beyond Scripture. Gnostics did not overtly deny Scripture, but they taught that the necessary key that unlocks the true meaning of the biblical texts is *gnosis* (the Greek word for “knowledge”)—supernatural enlightenment that comes from a mystical experience. Gnostic enlightenment can be imparted to select people only by those who have had the mystical experience.

The belief that nearly dead or dying people are given special insight into the spiritual realm is a classic gnostic idea—a devilish doctrine. Thus it is no wonder that people who become obsessed with near-death experiences and back-from-the-dead testimonies are easily drawn into superstition, mysticism, and occultism.

Raymond Moody’s forays into supernaturalism likewise took a sinister turn. It was clear from the start that Moody himself flatly rejected what the Bible teaches about the human soul after death, divine judgment, heaven, and hell. In that first breakout best seller, he wrote,

Through all of my research . . . I have not heard a single reference to a heaven or a hell or anything like the customary picture to which we are exposed in this society. Indeed, many persons have stressed how unlike their experiences were to what they had been led to expect in the course of their religious training. One woman who “died” reported: “I had always heard that when you die, you see both heaven and hell, but I didn’t see either one.” . . . Furthermore, in quite a few instances reports have come from persons who had no religious beliefs or training at all prior to their experiences, and their descriptions do not seem to differ in content from people who had quite strong religious beliefs.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, according to Moody, even those with strong religious beliefs usually “returned [from their near-death experiences] with a new model and a new understanding of the world beyond—a vision which features not unilateral judgment, but rather cooperative development towards the ultimate end of self-realization.”<sup>12</sup>

In other words, Moody claimed his subjects’ near-death experiences led them to reject the truth that “it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment” (Hebrews 9:27).

<sup>11</sup>Moody, *Life after Life*, 128–129.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 92.

Moody's findings were carefully skewed against almost everything the Bible teaches about heaven, hell, and the disposition of souls after death. But he was *especially* keen to eliminate anything that might hint at the reality of divine judgment. He deliberately highlighted features in his subjects' testimonies that contradicted the Bible's clear and frequent assertion that "we will all stand before the judgment seat of God" (Romans 14:10). According to Moody, people's experiences in the afterlife had opened their eyes to a different, more profound *gnosis*:

In most cases, the reward-punishment model of the afterlife is abandoned and disavowed, even by many who had been accustomed to thinking in those terms. They found, much to their amazement, that even when their most apparently awful and sinful deeds were made manifest before the being of light, the being responded not with anger and rage, but rather only with understanding, and even with humor.<sup>13</sup>

Having repudiated what Scripture teaches, but faced with mounting empirical evidence that there is an unseen spiritual realm and human existence doesn't end at death, Moody was forced to seek unbiblical explanations. He too began to dabble with occultism. His later books reflect a haunting obsession with necromancy. One of them, for example, is titled *Elvis after Life: Unusual Psychic Experiences Surrounding the Death of a Superstar*.<sup>14</sup>

These days Raymond Moody is essentially a medium, though he still operates under the guise of a medical researcher. He employs all the classic techniques of parlor-room spiritualist soothsaying in his "therapy"—including peering into crystal balls and mirror-gazing as means of contacting the dead. He describes in detail how he built a *psychomanteum*, or apparition chamber, "a modernized version of the ones found in ancient Greece, with the same goal in mind, that of seeing apparitions of the dead."<sup>15</sup> It is a special room with a mirror, in which Moody claims to commune with the ghosts of the deceased. In that room, he says, "I conversed with my deceased grandmother, who

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Raymond A. Moody, *Elvis after Life: Unusual Psychic Experiences Surrounding the Death of a Superstar* (Atlanta: Peachtree, 1987).

<sup>15</sup>Moody, *Reunions*, 65–66.

appeared to be just as real as anyone could be.”<sup>16</sup> If he is telling the truth, he was communicating with demons.

Moody believes he has connected others with their dead loved ones in his apparition chamber. He tells, for example, how one woman “felt the presence of her aunt. Her visit to the psychomanteum and its aftermath have changed her mind about the paranormal. Where before she had doubts about an afterlife, she is now persuaded of a life beyond death.”<sup>17</sup>

### Seduced by the Light

By the start of the 1990s, curiosity about near-death experiences and travelers’ tales of heaven had spilled out of the New Age movement, spiritism, and other overtly occult communities, and it was seeping into more mainstream religious circles. That trend accelerated after 1992, when *Embraced by the Light*, by Betty Eadie, was published.<sup>18</sup> Here was a simple laywoman’s personal account of her own near-death experience, replete with powerful religious overtones, narrated like a Christian testimony.

According to Melvin Morse, MD,<sup>19</sup> who wrote the foreword, Eadie’s book “is really a textbook of the near-death experience, written as a

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., xvii. Moody says that during her life this woman “was habitually cranky and negative” [20], but during this ghostly encounter she seemed very different:

I quickly sensed that the woman who stood before me had been transformed in a very positive way. I felt warmth and love from her as she stood there and an empathy and compassion that surpassed my understanding. She was confidently humorous, with an air of quiet calm and joyfulness about her.

The reason I had not recognized her at first was that she appeared much younger than she was when she died, in fact even younger than she had been when I was born. I don’t remember having seen any photographs of her at the age she seemed to be during this encounter, but that is irrelevant here since it was not totally through her physical appearance that I recognized her. Rather, I knew this woman through her unmistakable presence and through the many memories we reviewed and discussed. In short this woman was my deceased grandmother. I would have known her anywhere (ibid.).

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 101.

<sup>18</sup>Betty J. Eadie, *Embraced by the Light* (Detroit: Gold Leaf, 1992).

<sup>19</sup>In August 2012, Morse was arrested and charged with using waterboarding techniques on his eleven-year-old daughter. Police who investigated the case speculated that he may have been using simulated drowning to bring the girl to a near-death state. (His particular area of specialization involves the near-death experiences of children.)

Morse’s ex-wife says he has overdosed on pills and alcohol multiple times. He admits to only one such incident but denies that it was a suicide attempt, calling it a “suicide gesture” instead.

Morse has appeared as an expert on near-death experiences on “Larry King Live” and “The Oprah Winfrey Show.” He has written or coauthored at least four books on the subject (“Near-death Experiences Doctor May Have Been Experimenting by ‘Waterboarding’ Stepdaughter, Police Say,” [Associated Press, August 15, 2012]).

simple and wonderful story that we can all understand.”<sup>20</sup> The book soared quickly into the top position on the *New York Times* list and hovered there for 78 weeks, selling more than 13 million copies.

Ms. Eadie told a fantastic tale that begins in the hospital, where she says a partial hysterectomy left her on the very threshold of death. She claims that as her soul began to depart her body, she did not go directly to heaven but first experienced out-of-body travel to several earthly locations. Along the way she says she encountered angels—“guardian spirits who helped her to understand important things about her life and then to comprehend her relationship with her family. They assisted her transition into death.”<sup>21</sup>

She says she was then taken through a dark tunnel before finally crossing over into the intense white light of heaven. She recounts her experience in remarkably vivid detail.

*Embraced by the Light* is strongly influenced by Mormon and New Age precepts (see appendix 1), but Betty Eadie’s telling of the tale is expertly suffused with lots of evangelical clichés and biblical imagery—enough so that when it shot to the top of secular best-seller lists, it was welcomed and widely read in the evangelical community and quickly gained a sizable following there. Evangelical critics pointed out an abundance of antibiblical ideas, Mormon teachings, and serious theological flaws in Ms. Eadie’s worldview,<sup>22</sup> but her book seemed to have far-reaching and long-lasting influence in the evangelical community anyway. It clearly helped whet an appetite for similar tales.

That craving for stories about heaven soon grew into a dangerous addiction.

### Hooked on Heavenly Hallucinations

Booksellers love when their readers’ interests become an obsession. Publishing houses are now churning out new accounts of mystical heavenly excursions practically every month. Titles in that category

<sup>20</sup>Melvin Morse, in Eadie, *Embraced by the Light*, xv.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, xvi.

<sup>22</sup>The first edition of this book (*The Glory of Heaven* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1996]) devoted much of the opening chapter to a critique of Eadie’s teaching. Most of that material is preserved in appendix 1 of this edition. See also Douglas R. Groothuis, *Deceived by the Light* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1995); and Richard Abanes, *Embraced by the Light and the Bible: Betty Eadie and Near-Death Experiences in the Light of Scripture* (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1994).

are some of the hottest products in the publishing industry today—and the book-buying public is still clamoring for more.

What I find most intriguing (and disturbing) about the whole trend is the speed and subtlety with which it has invaded the church. Before 1995, no reputable Christian publisher would have seriously considered publishing any book about heaven that was based on a mystical experience someone had while clinically dead. But incredibly, the best-known, top-selling celestial travelogues today are practically all produced and aggressively marketed by major evangelical publishers.<sup>23</sup> They are written by authors who profess faith in Christ. They specifically target Bible-believing Christians. And all of them are teeming with false, flawed, and fanciful notions about heaven.

In fact, the features that tend to stand out in these tales are macabre phenomena and offbeat “revelations” that biblically minded believers have no business paying attention to. Communication between the living and the dead is of course a common feature in all these stories. People converse with their dead relatives and then return with family news from the other side. One woman claims she could taste, feel, and smell people in heaven merely by looking at them. An accident victim says the devil appeared to him visibly somewhere between the crash site and paradise, falsely accusing and taunting him. Another man describes celestial warehouses full of human appendages, which he says are miracles and healings waiting to be claimed. Still another says the necktie he was wearing during his visit to heaven retained the fragrance of paradise, so whenever he wants to be transported back there, he simply sniffs that tie.

This may sound ironic, but a fixation with worldly things is another common feature in tales such as these. Many heavenly travelers suggest that in heaven it’s possible to observe earthly events as closely as one chooses. The favorite pastimes in heaven often have a strong terrestrial flavor, too. There are lawn games, picnics, sporting events, and various kinds of heavenly horseplay. Of course, most returnees from

<sup>23</sup>According to lists published by both Amazon.com and *The New York Times*, four of the top best-selling nonfiction works during the summer of 2012 were accounts of people who claimed to have been to heaven and back. All four were published by evangelical publishing houses: *Heaven Is for Real* (Nelson); *To Heaven and Back* (Waterbrook Multnomah); *The Boy Who Came Back from Heaven* (Tyndale); and *90 Minutes in Heaven* (Revell).

heaven report that the colors, sounds, smells, sights, and sensations they encountered in paradise are amazingly vivid. But when they actually describe the heavenly scene, the narrative always sounds terribly mundane by comparison to Ezekiel 1 or Revelation 4.

In most respects, the Christianized versions of these stories bear a troubling resemblance to their secular predecessors. The truly distinctive elements of their message have nothing to do with any biblical teaching about heaven and the afterlife. The authors of these stories don't seem particularly troubled by that. After all, they are claiming a superior understanding of the afterlife—gained not from Scripture but from visions, phantasms, out-of-body travel, and other occult means.

They don't always agree with one another in the key details, however. One heavenly visitor says languages aren't necessary in the after-life because everyone communicates telepathically; another says people in heaven speak an angelic language that sounds like music. One says people in heaven carry swords in order to keep the devil out; others say heaven is a place of perfect peace and calm, with no hint of any conflict whatsoever. One insists that there is a hole in heaven leading directly to hell. No bother that Jesus said emphatically that no one can ever pass from heaven to hell or vice versa (Luke 16:26).

All the best-selling stories in this genre contain whimsical quackery like that—some more, some less. But that is what they all seem to accentuate, thus trivializing the true glory of heaven.

There is no warrant anywhere in Scripture to treat the reveries of comatose or seriously injured people as if they had prophetic significance. In fact, Scripture warns us repeatedly not to take the claims of *any* prophet at face value. “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1; cf. Deuteronomy 13:1–5; Jeremiah 29:8–9; Matthew 7:15–16; 24:4–5; 2 Peter 2:1).

Contemporary evangelicals simply have a too-low view of Scripture and a too-high regard for trendy things. Perhaps no demographic is more easily suggestible or more lemminglike. Accordingly, evangelical readers have become the largest market for and the most voracious consumers of stories told by people who claim to have gone to heaven and come back.

The torrent of those tales is not likely to diminish soon, and evangelical publishing houses are not about to stop publishing them. Given the relatively high number of multimillion best sellers in the genre, these books no doubt already constitute the single most financially lucrative nonfiction category in the history of evangelical publishing.

*Nonfiction?* That, of course, is the label under which publishers and booksellers like to categorize these books. It would require a degree of stoic forbearance that I do not possess to acknowledge that label without disclaiming it. But it is a fact that these heavenly guidebooks are invariably marketed as nonfiction rather than fantasy. (One of the current best sellers is sold with the words “A True Story” imprinted on the cover in bold type as large as the book’s title.)

Sadly, undiscerning readers abound, and they take these stories altogether seriously. The stratospheric sales figures and far-reaching influence of these books ought to be a matter of serious concern for anyone who truly loves the Word of God.

In the chapter that follows, we will examine one of the best-known examples of the genre to see why.



# Heaven *Is* Real; Hallucinations Are Not

Far too much of the present interest in heaven, angels, and the afterlife stems from carnal curiosity. It is not a trend those of us who accept the authority of Scripture should encourage or celebrate. Any pursuit that diminishes people's reliance on the Bible is fraught with grave spiritual dangers—especially if it is something that leads gullible souls into superstition, gnosticism, occultism, New Age philosophies, or any kind of spiritual confusion. Those are undeniably the roads most traveled by people who feed a morbid craving for detailed information about the afterlife by devouring stories of people who claim to have gone to the realm of the dead and returned.

Scripture *never* indulges that desire. In the Old Testament era, every attempt to communicate with the dead was deemed a sin on par with sacrificing infants to false gods (Deuteronomy 18:10–12). The Hebrew Scriptures say comparatively little about the disposition of souls after death, and the people of God were strictly forbidden to inquire further on their own. Necromancy was a major feature of Egyptian religion. It also dominated every religion known among the Canaanites. But under Moses's law it was a sin punishable by death (Leviticus 20:27).

The New Testament adds much to our understanding of heaven (and hell) but we are still not permitted to add our own subjective ideas and experience-based conclusions to what God has specifically revealed through his inerrant Word. Indeed, we are forbidden in *all* spiritual matters to go beyond what is written (1 Corinthians 4:6).

Lazarus of Bethany fell ill and died, and his body lay devoid of life and decaying in a tomb for four days before Jesus raised him (John 11:17). A whole chapter in John's Gospel is devoted to the story of how Jesus brought him back from the dead. But there's not a hint or a whisper anywhere in Scripture about what happened to Lazarus's soul in that four-day interim. The same thing is true of every person in Scripture who was ever brought back from the dead, beginning with the widow's son whom Elijah raised in 1 Kings 17:17–24 and culminating with Eutychus, who was healed by Paul in Acts 20:9–12. Not one biblical person ever gave any recorded account of his or her postmortem experience in the realm of departed souls.

The apostle Paul had an experience of heaven so real he wasn't sure whether he had been physically carried there or merely caught up in a vision. He mentions the experience only once—reluctantly—because false teachers were challenging his authority and this heavenly vision was a vital affirmation of his apostolic credentials. But he had kept completely silent about the whole affair until fourteen years after the fact. Even then, he framed his testimony as a third-person narrative: “I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into paradise” (2 Corinthians 12:2–3). Despite the third-person pronouns, this was clearly Paul's own experience, because he shifts into first person as soon as he starts talking about how God humbled him in the aftermath of that experience: “To keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited” (v. 7).

The typical contemporary evangelical response to an event like that would be to write (or have a ghostwriter produce) a sensational account. It would be filled with specific details of what heaven is like and what's currently happening there. A large publishing conglomerate would publish it, and once it was clearly established as a blockbuster, they would start working on sequels and movie rights.

But having mentioned the *fact* of his experience, the apostle Paul declines to give any details whatsoever. He merely says that he “heard

things that cannot be told, which man may not utter” (2 Corinthians 12:4). He employs a Greek expression that means it is not lawful for any human to speak of the things he heard.

So Paul, who had been called to one of the most important apostolic roles in the early church, was forbidden to discuss what he saw and heard in paradise. The brief three-verse account he gives of his vision makes quite a stark contrast to all the currently popular volumes written by people who claim to have been to heaven and come back.

Why would it have been unlawful for Paul to describe what he heard in heaven? After all, Ezekiel, Isaiah, and the apostle John each had visions of the very throne room of heaven and wrote about what they saw and heard. Their accounts are even part of inspired Scripture.

*That is precisely the point.* Those in the Bible who wrote about seeing heaven were expressly commanded by God to do so and were carried along by the Spirit of God as they wrote (2 Peter 1:21). The relatively brief accounts they each gave are part of the God-breathed text. The Almighty himself had those men record that information for our benefit in the precise words that he chose. No extrabiblical account of heaven can legitimately make that claim.

Those who demand to know more than Scripture tells us are sinning: “The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever” (Deuteronomy 29:29). The limits of our curiosity are thus established by the boundary of biblical revelation.

The typical Christian today seems oblivious to the principles established by Deuteronomy 29:29 and 1 Corinthians 4:6 (“that you may learn . . . not to go beyond what is written”). In fact, people seem to be looking for spiritual truth, messages from God, and insight into the spirit world everywhere *but* Scripture. Today’s evangelicals have been indoctrinated by decades of charismatic influence to think God regularly bypasses his written Word in order to speak directly to any and every believer—as if extrabiblical revelation were a standard feature of ordinary Christian experience. Many therefore think charity requires them to receive claims of “fresh revelation” with a kind of pious gullibility. After all, who are we to question someone else’s private word from God?

So when dozens of best-selling authors who profess to be Christians are suddenly claiming they have seen heaven and want to tell us what it's like, most of the Christian community is defenseless in the wake of the onslaught.

### **Where the Angels Sang to Me**

Todd Burpo's astonishing multimillion best seller, *Heaven Is for Real*,<sup>1</sup> epitomizes the phenomenal success Christian authors and publishers have had with books about alleged visits to heaven. It also illustrates the danger of basing one's ideas about the afterlife on personal experience rather than Scripture alone.

Most of the familiar features of the genre are included in Burpo's story: conscious out-of-body travel; the ability to see things from an ethereal perspective; visions of angelic beings; sublime emotions; vivid lights and colors; and lots of unexpected but finely detailed trivia about heaven's look and feel. But *Heaven Is for Real* also includes dozens of biblical references throughout. The entire story is carefully clothed in familiar evangelical language and imagery.

A decade ago, Betty Eadie seemed to be trying hard to sound like an evangelical, but she failed. Todd Burpo has clearly succeeded in selling a near-death-experience story to evangelicals as if it were a legitimate source of knowledge about heaven. Drove of Christian readers have heartily embraced his book.

Burpo is the bivocational pastor of a quasi-Pentecostal Wesleyan church in a remote southwestern Nebraska farm community. He is culturally, if not doctrinally, evangelical—a fairly typical middle-American small-town pastor. In his own words, he is “one of those pastors who walks back and forth during the sermon. Not a holy-rolling, fire-and-brimstone guy by any stretch, but not a soft-spoken minister in vestments, performing liturgical readings either. I'm a storyteller, and to tell stories I need to move around some.”<sup>2</sup>

So Burpo is comfortably familiar with evangelical culture and expectations. He says he believes in the authority of Scripture, and he at-

<sup>1</sup>Todd Burpo with Lynn Vincent, *Heaven Is for Real: A Little Boy's Astounding Story of His Trip to Heaven and Back* (Nashville: Nelson, 2010).

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 10.

tempts to draw as many connections as possible between his story and what the Bible says about heaven, angels, and the spiritual realm. That's why so many of the details he gives are carefully set alongside biblical allusions and proof texts. In that respect at least, *Heaven Is for Real* certainly includes more references from the Bible than most in the genre.

What sets the book apart, however, is that it is based on the experience of a not-quite-four-year-old boy.<sup>3</sup> It is the story of Pastor Burpo's eldest son, Colton, who as a toddler nearly died from a burst appendix. Four months after the medical crisis, when Todd's wife, Sonja, asked little Colton if he remembered being in the hospital, he answered, "Yes, Mommy, I remember. . . . That's where the angels sang to me."<sup>4</sup>

Todd Burpo's response to that comment was breathless amazement. In fact, the level of awe and stupefaction he describes seems quite out of proportion to the significance of such a statement from a typical four-year-old. He writes, "Time froze. Sonja and I looked at each other, passing a silent message: *Did he just say what I think he said?*"<sup>5</sup> As Pastor Burpo himself recounts the story, he was easily, immediately, and utterly convinced that Colton had indeed had some kind of out-of-body experience:

Colton said that he "went up out of" his body, that he had spoken with angels, and had sat in Jesus' lap. And the way we knew he wasn't making it up was that he was able to tell us what we were doing in another part of the hospital: "You were in a little room by yourself praying, and Mommy was in a different room and she was praying and talking on the phone."<sup>6</sup>

That same unhesitating credulity sets the tone for the entire book. Showing little understanding of how fertile the imagination of a barely four-year-old boy can be, Pastor Burpo embraced Colton's testimony with implicit faith. He instantly decided to subjugate his whole understanding of heaven to little Colton's instruction. "If he

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<sup>3</sup>Most of the book's publicity indicates that Colton Burpo was four years old when he says he visited heaven. According to the timeline given in the book, however, he was born May 19, 1999, and the crisis that nearly took his life occurred March 5, 2003 (ibid., 155–158). That means he was only three years and nine months old at the time, making it all the more remarkable that his retelling of the experience years later is so detailed and specific.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., xiii.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., xiv.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 61.

had really seen Jesus and the angels, I wanted to become the student, not the teacher!”<sup>7</sup>

### **Well, It Was Just Incredible**

Many of the things Todd Burpo interprets as irrefutable proof his son was given special revelation are clearly little more than standard Sunday school stories with a typical preschooler’s slightly distorted slant. Pastor Burpo recounts this conversation that took place shortly after Colton began talking about heaven:

“Did anything else happen?”

He nodded, eyes bright. “Did you know that Jesus has a cousin? Jesus told me his cousin baptized him.”

“Yes, you’re right,” I said. “The Bible says Jesus’ cousin’s name is John.” Mentally, I scolded myself: *Don’t offer information. Just let him talk . . .*

“I don’t remember his name,” Colton said happily, “but he was really nice.”

*John the Baptist is “nice”?!*

Just as I was processing the implications of my son’s statement—that he had *met* John the Baptist—Colton spied a plastic horse among his toys and held it up for me to look at. “Hey, Dad, did you know Jesus has a horse?”

“A horse?”

“Yeah, a rainbow horse. I got to pet him.”<sup>8</sup>

Sonja Burpo was as quick as her husband to conclude that Colton had truly traveled to heaven and come back with powerful knowledge of what it is like. Here is Pastor Burpo’s account of the conversation where he informed his wife that Colton had met John the Baptist. (She was attending a worship conference, so he excitedly phoned to tell her about the incident):

I stood and bounded up the stairs, picked up the phone, and dialed Sonja’s cell. She picked up and I could hear music and singing in the background. “Do you know what your son just said to me?!”

“What?” she shouted over the noise.

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 62.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 63.

“He told me he met John the Baptist!”

“What?”

I summarized the rest for her and could hear the amazement in her voice on the other end of the line.

She tried to press me for details, but the worship conference hall was too loud. Finally we had to give up. “Call me tonight after dinner, okay?” Sonja said. “I want to know everything!”<sup>9</sup>

Pastor Burpo seems to think Colton’s perspective on John the Baptist and heavenly rainbow-horses is full of profound insight. In reality, precocious preschoolers make imaginative remarks that sound like authoritative-sounding observations all the time. Art Linkletter made a career of eliciting unintentionally witty commentary on profound matters from kids on live daily television.

Remember, Colton had lived his entire life in a pastor’s home, overhearing conversations, listening to stories, and being exposed to teaching focused on biblical themes. At one point, Pastor Burpo acknowledges that he had read countless Bible stories from picture books to Colton.<sup>10</sup> And yet when Colton mentions in passing that “Jesus has markers” (meaning, evidently, the nail prints in his hands and feet), Todd Burpo’s breathless response is, “*He saw this. He had to have.*”<sup>11</sup>

And thus the book continues. When Colton says something far-fetched, heterodox, or unbiblical, Todd Burpo finds a way to accept it as true just the same. At one point, for example, Colton says he was sitting in a little chair next to the Spirit of God. So Todd asks his son what the Holy Spirit looks like:

“Hmm,” Colton replies. “That’s kind of a hard one . . . he’s kind of blue.”<sup>12</sup>

Obviously, a remark like that begs for a follow-up question or some kind of explanation. *Blue?* Does Colton envision the Holy Spirit as Papa Smurf? Is he describing a bluish cloud of haze? “Blue”? What is he talking about?

At first, Todd seems to be pondering similar questions. (“I was

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 64.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 66.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 65–67.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 103.

trying to picture that. . . .”) But Colton immediately changes the subject, and no further explanation is ever given. The only hint we get about what is in Colton’s mind comes more than twenty pages later, when he tells his father that Jesus “shoots down power” from heaven while Todd Burpo is preaching. This time Todd presses for an explanation: “What’s the power like?”

“It’s the Holy Spirit.”<sup>13</sup> Evidently Colton envisions the Holy Spirit like the electrical discharge from a Tesla coil, and he pictures Jesus with the ability to fire blue lightning bolts of power from his fingers directly into preachers.

Todd Burpo is dumbfounded: “If there were comic-strip thought-bubbles over people’s heads, mine would’ve been filled with question marks and exclamation points right then.”<sup>14</sup> Clearly, however, Todd is already a firm believer in Colton’s vision of heaven. Recollecting that he had always said a prayer for God’s help every time he preached, he writes, “To imagine God answering it by ‘shooting down power’ . . . well, it was just incredible.”<sup>15</sup>

### **Gnostic Enlightenment in the Hands of a Preschooler**

Pastor Burpo evidently believes, based on Colton’s testimony, that all the inhabitants of heaven (except Jesus) have wings and halos;<sup>16</sup> that what occupies their time is “homework”;<sup>17</sup> and that Colton met and conversed not only with a grandfather who died years before Colton was born, but also with a sister who was never born because Colton’s mother suffered a miscarriage.<sup>18</sup>

Colton says his unborn sister appeared to him as a “little girl,” and his grandfather, who had died at age 61, looked like a 29-year-old.<sup>19</sup> Colton himself evidently remained only three (going on four) during his time in heaven. Although he says he had wings like everyone else, he was evidently disappointed by how small his wings were.<sup>20</sup> He also

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 72–73. Colton says everyone in heaven flew—“Well, all except for Jesus. He was the only one in heaven who didn’t have wings. Jesus just went up and down like an elevator.”

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 85–88, 94–95.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 96, 122–123.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

says that everyone else in heaven had a sword, but he was denied one because he was too young. “Jesus wouldn’t let me have one. He said I’d be too dangerous.”<sup>21</sup>

The questions Todd Burpo asks his son betray a strange fixation on the physical appearance of things. Todd’s peculiar inquiry about what the Holy Spirit “looks like” is by no means the only example of this. When four-year-old Colton first began to talk about seeing people in heaven, Todd immediately began pressing for visual descriptions. He writes, “All I could think to ask was: ‘So what did the kids look like? What do people look like in heaven?’”<sup>22</sup> Later, when Colton informs his dad that he saw the devil in heaven, Pastor Burpo’s first question was, “What did he look like?”<sup>23</sup>

And of course, Todd Burpo persistently asked his son questions about the physical appearance of Christ:

When Colton saw Jesus in heaven, what did he look like? The reason for the frequency of this particular topic was that as a pastor, I wound up spending a lot of time at hospitals, in Christian bookstores, and at other churches—all places where there are lots of drawings and paintings of Christ. Often, Sonja and the kids were with me, so it became sort of a game. When we came across a picture of Jesus, we’d ask Colton, “What about this one? Is that what Jesus looks like?”

Invariably, Colton would peer for a moment at the picture and shake his tiny head. “No, the hair’s not right,” he would say. Or, “The clothes aren’t right.”

This would happen dozens of times over the next three years.<sup>24</sup>

In the end, Pastor Burpo says he saw a story on television about a twelve-year-old girl who claimed to have been in heaven and who had unusual skill as a painter. She had painted the image of a rugged blue-eyed man whom she said was Jesus. When Colton looked at the picture and pronounced it accurate, Todd says, “I finally felt that in Akiane’s portrait, we’d seen the face of Jesus. Or at least a startling likeness.”<sup>25</sup>

(Images of a blue-eyed Jesus can hardly be accurate. Blue eyes are

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 133.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 72.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 134.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 93.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 145.

a recessive trait, not native to Semitic races. A Hellenized Jew in the first century with generations of intermarriage in his genetic background might have had blue eyes, but the genealogy of Jesus given in the New Testament would seem to rule out the possibility that he had blue eyes.)

Most of the details Todd Burpo recounts about Colton's near-death experience came to light months after Colton's release from the hospital, and even then the story did not spill forth unprompted in a coherent account. Fragments and anecdotes arose here and there over a long period of time—usually in response to tenacious parental questioning. Thus new details were unearthed from Colton's memory on a fairly regular basis for years. In every case, without fail, Pastor Burpo concludes that Colton's knowledge of the afterlife could not have been gained through any means other than firsthand experience, and therefore he is easily convinced his son's account of heaven is fully reliable, accurate, and authoritative.

In a pithy review of the book, Tim Challies observed this motif:

Every one of Colton's experiences, or very nearly every one, follows a pattern. He tells his father some little detail. His father experiences a gasp or feels his heart skip a beat. "I could hardly breathe. My mind was reeling. My head was spinning." A Scripture verse comes to dad's mind that validates the experience. Colton gets bored and runs off. Repeat.<sup>26</sup>

### **A Faulty View of Faith**

The inclusion of Bible references throughout *Heaven Is for Real* may convince superficial readers that Pastor Burpo has painstakingly compared his son's account to Scripture and judged it accurate on that basis. But to those who take the time to look up the citations and analyze them in context with any degree of discernment, it will be clear that Todd Burpo's facile method of proof-texting betrays a lack of any serious engagement with Scripture. He has failed to test everything carefully as we are instructed and encouraged to do (1 Thessalonians 5:21; Acts 17:11).

<sup>26</sup>Tim Challies, "Heaven Is For Real," blogpost March 28, 2011, at <http://www.challies.com/book-reviews/heaven-is-for-real>.

Amazingly, Todd Burpo himself admits that he rarely “tested Colton’s memories against what the Bible says.”<sup>27</sup> In the one instance where he mentions this, he declares on the thinnest possible evidence that Colton “passed [the biblical test] without batting an eye.”

What was the biblical issue at stake on that occasion? Todd was asking his son if he had ever seen God’s throne. He first needed to explain to the boy what a “throne” is. (“I picked up the Bible storybook and pointed . . .”)

“Oh, yeah!” Colton replied. “I saw that a bunch of times!”

Todd, in keeping with the tone he maintains throughout the book, was utterly agog: “My heart sped up a little. Was I really going to get a glimpse into the throne room of heaven?”

Colton continued: “And do you know that Jesus sits right next to God? . . . Jesus’ chair is right next to his Dad’s!”<sup>28</sup>

Pastor Burpo’s response again emphasizes his avid credulity (not to mention his cluelessness about what kind of images a four-year-old raised on illustrated Bible stories might have in his mind): “That blew me away. There’s no way a four-year-old knows that. It was another one of those moments when I thought, *He had to have seen this.*”<sup>29</sup>

One of the most troubling aspects of *Heaven Is for Real* is the way Todd Burpo constantly insinuates that personal experiences—even the spectral memories of a three-year-old boy under anesthetics—are somehow more compelling than Scripture alone. “I had been a Christian since childhood and a pastor for half my life, so I believed that before. But now I *knew* it.”<sup>30</sup> Colton’s experiential exegesis of heaven has clearly made a far more profound impact on Todd (and has been more formative in his notion of the afterlife) than anything he had previously gleaned about heaven from his own study of Scripture.

That way of thinking is diametrically opposed to what the Bible says about faith, experience, and the authority of Scripture. In fact, the single most important defense Christians have against self-deception is a conviction that the written Word of God is more certain and more authoritative than *anyone’s* experience. Scripture teaches this

<sup>27</sup>Burpo, *Heaven Is for Real*, 101.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 100.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 100–101.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 84.

explicitly and repeatedly. For example, writing about his experience on the Mount of Transfiguration—an undeniable miracle at which other eyewitnesses were present—the apostle Peter says, “We did not follow cleverly devised myths. . . . We ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven” (2 Peter 1:16, 18). It was a stunning, unprecedented, up-close look at the glory of heaven—literally. Peter goes on to say, however, that the written Word of God is even more reliable than an experience of that caliber! “We have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention” (v. 19).

*Authentic* faith “comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17)—not from mystical experiences; certainly not from blindly trusting a child’s account of a mystical experience. That kind of naive conviction is not true faith at all; it has more in common with dangerous self-confidence.

Nevertheless, Pastor Burpo clearly believes that somehow, little Colton’s experience has bolstered his family’s faith in a way Scripture could never do. “I love the way my mom sums it up,” Todd writes, and then he quotes his mother’s words, which stand (except for a brief epilogue) as the book’s closing sentence: “I accepted the idea of heaven before, but now I visualize it. Before, I’d heard, but now I know that someday I’m going to see.”<sup>31</sup>

### **Where the Danger Chiefly Lies**

I’ve given this prolonged critique of *Heaven Is for Real* not because it is the worst of the genre, but because of all the books in this category, it is the most likely to be read and deemed harmless by the typical evangelical. It is *not* harmless. It denigrates the authority and sufficiency of Scripture; it confounds faith with superstition; it subtly elevates human experience to a higher level than the Word of God; it purports to reveal things about God and the heavenly realm that are not taught in Scripture; and it repeatedly insinuates that the testimony of someone who has been mystically enlightened can be a more effective stimulant to faith than Scripture alone.

In the chapters that follow, I want to turn to the question of what

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 150.

the Bible says about heaven. In a couple of appendixes, you'll find further critiques of some of the most popular and influential reports of near-death visits to heaven, including two mega-best-selling titles from evangelical publishers. All the authors of these stories—and evidently millions of readers as well—regard their testimonies as authoritative, reliable, and full of superior insights that can take readers to a higher level of understanding and enlightenment beyond what we can get from the Bible. In other words, all of these books take a similarly proto-gnostic stance on heaven and the afterlife. All of them are dangerous and misleading. That includes the ones that seem fairly benign as well as the ones that are clearly steeped in occult superstition. All of them stand as reminders to us that Scripture and Scripture alone is the only safe place for Christians to learn anything about the immortality of human souls, what happens to a person after death, what heaven is like, what awaits the unrighteous in hell, and what we can expect in the judgment to come.

That is the point I want to stress at the close of this chapter. It is the principle of *sola Scriptura*. That Latin expression means “Scripture alone.” It is a kind of shorthand expression that signifies the authority and sufficiency of Scripture. It means that Scripture is the sole rule of faith and practice for Christians—so that no duty, no teaching, and no belief that lacks a biblical foundation is ever to be deemed binding on any Christian.

To state the same thing in different words: the principle of *sola Scriptura* starts and ends with a recognition of the Bible's superiority over every other source of knowledge, every truth claim, every religious tradition, and every supposed new revelation.

This principle was one of the fundamental pillars of biblical Christianity recovered by the early Reformers after it had fallen into neglect and denial. That happened because sound, biblical doctrine had been crowded out of mainstream church life by false teaching, medieval superstition, ecclesiastical corruption, and a host of problems all related to the visible church's failure to submit to the authority of Scripture. The current evangelical fascination with near-death experiences (and with other extrabiblical sources of alleged spiritual enlightenment) is pointing backward to the same kind of apostasy.

Clearly, if we believe Scripture is the Word of God, we must reject every anecdotal account that contradicts or goes beyond what Scripture teaches. We must also refuse to get caught up in every kind of speculation, every truth claim, and every supposed new revelation that detracts from or leads people away from simple reliance on the Word of God.



“MacArthur cuts through the sentimentality that often accompanies so-called visits to heaven by taking us back to the Scriptures . . . and teaches us much needed lessons in biblical discernment.” **Erwin W. Lutzer**

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