

Heaven Is Real; Hallucinations Are Not

Scripture: John 1:18; John 3:13

Code: B140428

You're probably aware of the hit movie "Heaven Is for Real" and the popular book it's based on. Recently, various television news programs have invited John MacArthur to explain why he rejects the story of Colton Burpo's trip to heaven. But in those brief, edited interviews, much of John's biblical critique ended up on the cutting-room floor. We thought it would be appropriate to take a short break from our current blog series and explain in more detail why the truth about heaven isn't found in hallucinations and near-death experiences, but in the Word of God alone. –GTY Staff

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. 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.

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

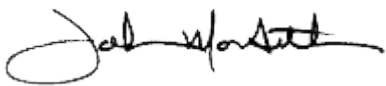
Indeed, it is right and beneficial for Christians to fix their hearts on heaven. Scripture repeatedly urges us to cultivate that perspective: "If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are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

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 (Hebrews 11:13). They are seeking a heavenly homeland (Hebrews 11:14). 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" (Hebrews 11:16 ESV). 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.

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. [1][Charles H. Spurgeon, *The New Park Street Pulpit*, 6 vols. (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1856), 2:20-21.]

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. We'll do that next time.



(Adapted from [*The Glory of Heaven*](#).)

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