

UNSEEN EXISTENCES



*Of Heaven,
Earth, and the
Divine Mystery
in All Things*

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1

FURTHER UP AND FURTHER IN



I have come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I've never seen it till now. The reason we loved the old Narnia is that it sometimes looked a little like this. . . . Come further up, come further in!

C. S. LEWIS, *THE LAST BATTLE*

WE ARE ALL BORN a long way from home. Home is not where we begin; home is where we need to go. Home is a place where we have not yet been. More than ever we are searching for home. It's a peculiar thing to say, but it is our experience, especially in the fatigue of late modernity, where spiritual homelessness is epidemic, where mystery is merely a problem to be solved, where religion is rejected as arcane ignorance, and where technology has become the totalizing but unsatisfying substitute for transcendence.

According to doctrinaire materialism, the philosophical dogma of modernity, we're stranded in a sterile world of mere matter. The



creation myth of empiricism is that the phenomenon of consciousness is an inexplicable cosmic accident, and human beings are nothing but gene-replicating machines in a theater of the absurd. We're wandering alone in a world devoid of meaning. We're homeless. We may not feel this estrangement in the blessed innocence of childhood, but as we leave adolescence and move into adulthood it becomes, at least for many, a real, if quiet, crisis. We feel adrift, lost, disoriented, like strangers in a strange land. Many accept this lost innocence as an inevitability of adulthood and cope with it one way or another, perhaps having a resigned resonance with a forlorn lyric from Pink Floyd, "The child is grown, the dream is gone, I have become comfortably numb."¹ To be comfortably numb is for many an aspirational alternative to being uncomfortably disturbed by life's apparent lack of meaning.

But enough of that. This book is not a rehashing of the now well-known problem—we have Hemingway and French existentialist films for that kind of commiseration. I would like to do something different—I want to offer something constructive. Not a trite solution but a gesture in the direction of where I believe hope can be found. What is needed is a *pilgrimage*—a pilgrimage of the soul toward the homeland where we've never been. If our pilgrimage is true, it is a journey inspired by wonder, waymarked by beauty, and ultimately a quest for a forgotten realm called heaven. It is the spiritual exploration of the heavenly country that is our true homeland. We press on in our pilgrimage, always crying, "Further up! Further in!"

And this is what heaven is—the eternal realm of *unseen* existences. Heaven is a reality that is unseen empirically, yet absolutely



real ontologically. Heaven belongs to the nonmaterial realm of reality and thus cannot ordinarily be perceived directly by the physical senses. It is the other world that is not empirically examined but “spiritually discerned” (1 Cor 2:14). This is what Paul (following in the steps of Plato) tells us about the nature of reality: “We look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal” (2 Cor 4:18).

What Plato intuited as the unseen realm of the Forms, the Bible calls heaven. The very first thing the Bible tells us is that the phenomenon of being exists in two realms: heaven and earth. “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen 1:1 RSV). From the beginning of creation there have been the heavens and the earth, the spiritual and the material, the eternal and the temporal. In Hebrew Scripture and in Greek philosophy the more substantial of these two realms is not the visible, temporal, material realm, but the unseen, eternal, spiritual realm. The spiritual should not be thought of as insubstantial. In the philosophy of Plato and Plotinus this is the realm of the eternal Forms, of which the material realm is but a temporal and ephemeral reflection.

According to Platonic thought, the mountains, trees, and horses of this world are an imperfect and fleeting likeness of eternal mountains, trees, and horses. The material world is a shadow of the real thing. Earth is a shadowland; heaven the land of perfect light. Earth is the realm of the temporal, while heaven is the realm of the eternal. And this is not nearly so far removed from ancient Jewish thought as some have assumed. In the theology of the Hebrew Scriptures, heaven and glory are closely



related, and significantly the etymology of the Hebrew word for glory (*kavod*) is associated with weightiness or heaviness. The idea is that what is truly substantial is found in the heavens, of which earth is but a shadowy resemblance.

In Greek philosophy that which is true, good, and beautiful finds imperfect representation only because of the existence of the perfect and eternal True, Good, and Beautiful. What we find in the epistles of Paul is a synthesis of Hebrew thought and Greek philosophy—a synthesis that was further developed by the early Christian theologians. The apostles and church theologians did not see Hebrew revelation and Greek philosophy at odds, rather they saw them as complementary—the one informing the other. The combination of Hebrew Scripture and Greek philosophy was the fertile soil from which Christian theology emerged. Thus from late antiquity through the medieval period and into early modernity, Christian culture understood heaven as real, eternal, and ultimately our true home. Earth was the place of a pilgrim's sojourn from which glimpses of heavenly glory could be seen in what is true, good, and beautiful. But all that began to change with the rise of empiricism and rationalism.

As our scientific capacity to perceive and interpret the material world increased, the spiritual world steadily receded into the background, to the point where Nietzsche's madman eventually declared, "God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him!"² Of course science did not actually kill God, but if we become so mesmerized by the world of matter that we naively assume no other world *can* exist, we become blind to heaven; and then, for us, God *is* dead. What's happened is that we've become

so attuned to the material world that we have dulled our innate capacity to perceive the spiritual world—a world that Walt Whitman described as “unseen existences.”

Ours is an age of acute empirical perception that affords spectacular scientific and technological developments, but our age is also an epoch of dire spiritual dullness leading to a deep poverty of the soul. This lack of spiritual perceptivity engenders a profound sense of emptiness and meaninglessness. If matter is all there is, then not much really matters. What’s the point of figuring out how the universe works if the universe itself is pointless? This is the dire dilemma and existential crisis engendered by a meta-narrative of materialism. If all that exists is nothing more than a random assortment of atoms, the search for meaning is doomed from the start.

When heaven is removed from our cosmology, earth loses its meaning. Modern man has become an idiot-savant—a material savant and a spiritual idiot. It’s this condition that T. S. Eliot addresses in his famous poem “The Hollow Men.” Written in 1925, it captures the nihilism of the “lost generation”—those writers and artists who came of age during WWI and lost their hope in a progressively improving world. It was also written two years before Eliot’s conversion to Anglican Christianity. Here are the opening and closing lines:

We are the hollow men
We are the stuffed men
Leaning together
Headpiece filled with straw. Alas! . . .



*This is the way the world ends
 This is the way the world ends
 This is the way the world ends
 Not with a bang but a whimper.*³

If we are to avoid ending up as hollow men and women whimpering about the emptiness of it all, we need to find the paths of unseen existences. Our science and technology cannot save our soul. To be clear, I give all due respect to scientific discovery and technological advancement—I am a grateful beneficiary of it. But scientific technology as a god will leave us abandoned, lost, and whimpering. Nietzsche hoped that a world without heaven would lead to the Übermensch of supermen; but it was T. S. Eliot who got it right: A world without heaven leads only to the despair of hollow men.

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO HEAVEN?

Coming to faith as a teenager in the 1970s, I inherited a more or less modern and impoverished Christian notion of heaven—heaven as the good place way out there somewhere that you hope to go to when you die. (Or whisked away to in the rapture, as the loopy eschatology of *The Late Great Planet Earth* et al. fantasized about.) Revivalist evangelism consisted primarily in cajoling others into securing their reservation for this post mortem heaven. Salvation was reduced to a heaven-or-hell minimalism. This life was seen as little more than an elaborate SAT test for afterlife placement. In its crudest form, any real concern for the planet itself was shrugged off with a callous quip: “Who cares? It’s all going to burn.” A pie-in-the-sky, I’ll-fly-away-when-I-die, in-the-sweet-by-and-by theology of heaven is what I inherited and to some extent preached for over twenty years.



But in my forties my theology began to change, which is to say it finally began to develop in a serious fashion. Part of my theological shift entailed the embrace of a much more earthly faith. I rightly came to understand that an escapist faith that was unconcerned about God's good earth and issues of justice in this life is a modern and maligned distortion of the apostolic faith and unworthy of being called Christian. So I thoroughly rethought my theology and began to preach that Christian faith must inform and influence our entire life, including our ethics and politics. This was an absolutely essential theological correction. Amen!

But . . .

There is the pendulum effect, and this can be overdone. I don't mean that an emphasis on Christ-informed ethics and prophetic social justice can be overdone, but I *do* mean that if in our zeal for a *this-world* faith we lose sight of heaven, we have made a fatal mistake. I say fatal because a faith sans heaven places us on a trajectory that will eventually merge with fatalistic materialism.

Though an earthly faith is a necessity for all who seek to follow Jesus faithfully, we must make sure that we are not using an earthly faith to mask a subtle capitulation to the spirit of the age—a zeitgeist that insists there is no heaven and that the sole relevance of religion is found in its social value. Within this scheme, religion has no value of its own; it is simply a useful tool in the cause of all-important political or social pursuits. To put it plainly, Christianity without transcendence degenerates into politics. Sadly, this is an all-too-common reality within a politicized Christianity.

Until we fully entered the modern era, Christians always understood themselves as pilgrims passing through this world on

a journey toward the homeland of heaven. Heaven as our true telos was not escapism but the source of meaning for our earthly sojourn. Our spiritual forebears “confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth” (Heb 11:13 KJV). But this paradigm is now under significant pressure. Heaven is forsaken for earth as the be-all and end-all of human endeavor. But without a robust theology of heaven, Christians are left homeless. Theologian Hans Boersma explains it like this:

Heaven is the Christian home. Augustine sketches his account of the heavenly city without worrying about whether the Platonic and Christian traditions are compatible on this point. Along with nearly all Christian theologians prior to modernity, he was convinced that the Christian faith is about heavenly participation and that this biblical insight allows for some kind of Platonist-Christian synthesis.⁴

C. S. Lewis, like the early church theologians, can properly be described as a Christian Platonist. In *The Last Battle*, the final book in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Lewis sets forth in children’s fantasy his Christian eschatology, and in the penultimate chapter, “Further Up and Further In,” the old professor, whose wardrobe had been a portal into Narnia, mutters, “It’s all in Plato, all in Plato: bless me, what *do* they teach them at these schools!”⁵ Of course, the old professor is Lewis himself. And as a Christian Platonist, Lewis saw beauty in *this* world as an image of what we truly desire and what is ultimately found in the *heavenly* world. But he also insisted that beauty in this world should not be mistaken for the thing itself, for that would be to create an idol.

In *The Weight of Glory*, Lewis said that conveyors of beauty, things like music or books, “are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited.”⁶ Then Lewis diagnoses the source of the spell that has bewitched the modern mind. “Almost our whole education has been directed to silencing this shy, persistent, inner voice; almost all our modern philosophies have been devised to convince us that the good of man is to be found on this earth.”⁷

Lewis’s diagnosis of a disenchanting world in 1942 is even more true today. That it is now a nearly uncontested truism that “the good of man is to be found on this earth” shows how much this is the case. Today the whispers from another world are dismissed as pious fantasies—the superstitions of a bygone era. And I fear that too many contemporary Christians tacitly share this dismissal of heaven, evidenced by an apparent embarrassment to speak seriously of heaven.

But if Christianity is embarrassed to speak of heaven out of fear of its cultured despisers, then it is a dying religion desperately begging for relevance according to terms set by an atheistic philosophy. A Christianity that cannot speak confidently of heaven has nothing to offer a disenchanting world. And before we can reenchanted the world, we must first reenchanted the Christian soul. We’ve all heard the hackneyed warning against being so heavenly minded that we’re no earthly good. But this is not our problem. The problem of the disenchanting Christian soul is the exact opposite—we’re so enthralled by the material world that we have ceased to believe in any other.



To be heavenly minded is precisely what the apostle Paul commends when he says, “Set your minds on the things that are above, not on things that are on earth” (Col 3:2). And it should be stressed that being heavenly minded is no impediment to understanding life in this world. As the wise Mr. Raven counseled Mr. Vane in George MacDonald’s *Lilith*, “If you understood any world besides your own, you would understand your own much better.”⁸

The modern soul is disenchanted because we have sealed off the soul from heaven. We have built a materialist ceiling over our heads and said, “There is nothing beyond the ceiling—all of reality exists beneath the ceiling.” We have assumed that unseen existences are an impossibility, but this is nothing other than a modern, materialist superstition. One of the problems with philosophical materialism is that it is incapable of accounting for the existence of matter at all! Nevertheless, the spiritual component of our being discerns that there *is* something beyond the material veil, there *is* an eternal realm. It’s from the heavenly realm that the material realm gains meaning. And it’s not just the Greek philosophers who intuited that a realm of eternal Forms lies behind material shadows—the writer of Hebrews thinks the same thing.

In commenting on the tabernacle of Moses, the writer of Hebrews says, “[The priests] offer worship in a sanctuary that is a *sketch and shadow of the heavenly one*” (Heb 8:5, emphasis added). For the writer of Hebrews, the very real, very substantial temple of stone in Jerusalem was but a glimpse of the true and eternal heavenly temple. All that is true, good, and beautiful in this world has its origin the heavenly world. C. S. Lewis says it like this: “The Sun is the copy of the Good. Time is the moving image of eternity.

All visible things exist just in so far as they succeed in imitating the Forms.”⁹

Unfortunately, modernity has bullied us into thinking that the wisdom of Plato and Paul is just so much nonsense. We no longer think the sun is a copy of the Good; we think the sun is nothing more than a ball of hot plasma heated by nuclear fusion. We’ve made the modern mistake of thinking what a thing is *made of* is what a thing *is*. Your body may be made of an assortment of atoms, but that’s not who you *are*! Yet by a purely materialistic account of existence, that’s exactly what we are—an assortment of atoms briefly appearing in a meaningless accident. All of this is to say that our soul has become disenchanting because we have lost sight of heaven.

PRISONERS IN UNDERLAND

The theme of a forgotten heaven shows up regularly in the theological writings of C. S. Lewis, but he seems to get his point across best when he does it through fiction. In *The Silver Chair* (the penultimate book in *The Chronicles of Narnia*), the children Jill Pole and Eustace Scrubb and the Narnians Prince Rilian and Puddleglum have fallen into the dark world of Underland. There they encounter a witch who tries to cast a spell on them that will cause them to forget and even disbelieve in the existence of any world beyond Underland. The witch tells them there is no Narnia because there cannot possibly be a country among the stones and mortar of the roof overhead. The visitors to Underland try to clarify to the witch that Narnia is *above* the roof where one can see the sky, the stars, and the sun. Prince Rilian then attempts to explain it to the witch:



You see that lamp. It is round and yellow and gives light to the whole room; and hangeth moreover from the roof. Now that thing which we call the sun is like the lamp, only far greater and brighter. It giveth light to the whole Overworld and hangeth in the sky.¹⁰

But the witch counters,

Hangeth from what, my lord? . . . You see? When you try to think out clearly what this *sun* must be, you cannot tell me. You can only tell me it is like the lamp. Your *sun* is a dream; and there is nothing in that dream that was not copied from the lamp. The lamp is the real thing—the *sun* is but a tale, a children’s story.¹¹

The witch’s spell quite nearly overcomes the children and Narnians as they all begin to agree with her that there is no sun and no Narnia above the roof of Underland, but at last Jill is able to speak the one essential truth.

For the last few minutes Jill had been feeling that there was something she must remember at all costs. And now she did. But it was dreadfully hard to say it. She felt as if huge weights were laid on her lips. At last, with an effort that seemed to take all the good out of her, she said:

“There’s Aslan.”¹²

Once Jill evoked the name of Aslan the spell began to weaken. Soon it was broken, and finally the witch, who had turned into a serpent, was slain.

In a materialist age that scoffs at the notion of heaven, the incantation that breaks the serpentine spell of modernity may



very well be, “There’s Jesus.” The foundation of Christian faith is the revelation of Jesus Christ, and Christians believe in heaven—the world of unseen existences—because Jesus speaks of heaven as a real world, his true home, and thus our true home. Here are three examples from the Gospel of John of how Jesus spoke of heaven:

Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man. (Jn 1:51)

No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. (Jn 3:13)

For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. (Jn 6:38)

Heaven is not a distant place, heaven is a *different dimension*. This means that heaven is not located in some remote corner of the cosmos; heaven is right here—right here in the realm of unseen, nonmaterial existences. Heaven is all around us. Perhaps we can think of heaven as the space between particles of matter—and at the subatomic level it’s almost *all* space. The heavens are God’s space, and the earth is human space. As the psalmist says, “The heavens are the LORD’s heavens, but the earth he has given to human beings” (Ps 115:16). Paul told the Athenians that in their quest for God, “he is not far from each one of us. For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’” (Acts 17:27-28). (And here it should be noted that Paul is quoting the Greek philosopher-poet Epimenides.)



ABOUT HEAVENLY THINGS

In his late-night conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus says to the baffled rabbi, “If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?” (Jn 3:12). Of course the Bible is concerned about earthly things—especially things like justice for the poor—but the concern about earthly things is predicated on heavenly things. With heaven understood not as a distant place but an unseen dimension and the nonmaterial “location” of the throne of God, let’s consider a few verses from the multitude of scriptural texts that speak of heaven, and let’s do so in the hope of recalibrating our modern minds toward a premodern, and thus more biblical, way of thinking about heaven.

I have sinned against heaven. (Lk 15:21)

These are the words of the repentant prodigal son in Jesus’ beloved parable. In this use of the word, heaven can be understood as the realm where all is as it should be. Thus in the Lord’s Prayer we pray that God’s will be done “on earth as it is in heaven” (Mt 6:10). Heaven is where the pattern of perfection is found, the realm where the True, the Good, and the Beautiful exist in unflawed form. When the prodigal son left home to squander his father’s wealth in debauched living, he departed from his heavenly form and “sinned against heaven.” In speaking of his relentless pursuit of moral and spiritual maturity, Paul says, “I press on toward the goal, toward the prize of the *heavenly* call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil 3:14, emphasis added). Even in this life we are striving by the grace of God to become more and more like our heavenly self.



Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. (Mt 16:17)

These are the words of Jesus in response to Simon Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. Simon came to know who Jesus truly is, not by empirical evidence or through rational deduction but by a revelation from heaven. Revelation can be understood as knowledge from the heavenly sphere communicated directly to the human spirit. That modernity has sought to discredit even the possibility of divine revelation has led to dire spiritual poverty. If we believe it is impossible for God to communicate to us directly from heaven, we have made ourselves prisoners of the witch in Underland. The arrogant and unfounded assertion of modernity that revelation is impossible needs to be once and for all dismissed as nothing but the prejudice of nineteenth-century hubris.

Suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. (Acts 9:3)

This is Luke's account of what happened to Saul of Tarsus on the Damascus road. A revelation from another world flashed as a burst of light on the cocksure Pharisee, shattering his spiritual pride and arrogant certitude. The apostolic faith of both Peter and Paul is attributable to heavenly revelation. It really is entirely possible to be the recipient of a flash of light from heaven that completely alters our life. C. S. Lewis describes his experience like this:

When we set out I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and when we reached the zoo I did. Yet I had not exactly spent the journey in thought. Nor in great emotion. . . . It was more like when a man, after a long sleep,

still lying motionless in bed, becomes aware that he is now awake.¹³

The history of Christianity is replete with such stories—from Saul of Tarsus on the Damascus road, to Saint Francis of Assisi in the San Damiano chapel, to C. S. Lewis riding in the sidecar of his brother’s motorcycle on a trip to the zoo.

But our citizenship is in heaven. (Phil 3:20)

This is what Paul told the believers living in the Roman colony of Philippi. Paul wants the Christians in Philippi to understand that their true citizenship is no longer in Rome but in heaven. This is something modern Christians desperately need to understand. From the moment of our baptism we become heavenly expatriates living in a world that is not our true home nor the land of our real citizenship. Such an understanding has important implications for how Christians engage in politics. Though we can and should seek the common good of the polis, we do so tempered by a measure of holy ambivalence, recognizing that “here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come” (Heb 13:14). Christians who engage in acrimonious politics with fierce religious devotion have forgotten that our citizenship is in heaven.

Who must remain in heaven until the time of universal restoration. (Acts 3:21)

This is what the apostle Peter said about Jesus as he preached in Solomon’s Portico, and five thousand people became believers. Our Christian hope is for a universal restoration—*apokatastasis*—accomplished in Christ as heaven and earth become one. The final

mention of heaven in the Bible is John the Revelator's picture of heaven healing all that is wrong with our wounded world. And it is one of the most beautiful passages in all the Bible.

And I saw the holy city, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them;

they will be his peoples,

and God himself will be with them;

he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more,

for the first things have passed away.” (Rev 21:2-4)

Beloved, do not let the cynical spirit of the age steal the hope of heaven from you! If we lose sight of heaven, we lose our most precious hope—the apokatastasis hope for the restoration of all things. This is the blessed hope that conveys strength and courage upon us as we make our pilgrim journey through life.

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