

EXCERPT



Unseen Existences

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

May 19, 2026 | \$24.99, 200 pages, hardcover | 978-1-5140-0564-4

Brian Zahnd is the founder and lead pastor of Word of Life Church in St. Joseph, Missouri. Known for his theologically informed preaching and his embrace of the deep and long history of the church, Zahnd is a frequent speaker at conferences, universities, and seminaries around the world.

Paths of the Spiritual World

In his “Song of the Open Road,” the great American poet Walt Whitman spoke of beloved paths that somehow touch on unseen existences. Poets and prophets are prone to use that kind of language—*unseen existences*. To the modern materialist mind, unseen existences are casually dismissed as a fallacy of the imagination. But, as Nick Cave astutely observes, “We must take our subtle spiritual intuitions seriously and view them as the quintessence that underlies the ordinary world. The rejection of the sacred is the fundamental reason for our existential discontent.” (Nick Cave, www.theredhandfiles.com/sudden-death-apologise-spiritual-intuition/). Our modern “existential discontent” will not be healed unless we remember what our ancestors knew: A spiritual world underlies what we think of as the ordinary world.

This other world, this unseen world, this spiritual world is commonly called heaven—not merely as the domain of the afterlife but as the spiritual world enfolded into the material world all around us. All premodern societies presumed the existence of this unseen world and tried in their own ways to interact with it properly through ritual and religion, shamanism and sacrifice. The ancient Hebrews, through revelation, eventually came to understand this unseen world as the domain of the one true God and a host of attendant spiritual beings called angels. The Greek philosophers, through what they described as reason, intuited that a spiritual world of eternal Forms sustaining the temporal material world must necessarily exist. And within Christianity the belief in a heavenly world is so basic, so assumed, so essential that without such a belief Christian theology would be incoherent.

And yet under the pressure of modernity and its subservience to empiricism, heaven seems to have gone missing in much of Christian theology. In the field of academic theology, there is a tacit embarrassment to speak too seriously about heaven lest one be dismissed as a fundamentalist rube by Christianity’s cultured despisers. I shrug off any such condescension and insist that if Christianity is to have a compelling message in the twenty-first century, it must once again speak confidently, if humbly, about the reality of unseen existences.

Once we acknowledge the reality of a spiritual world, we can understand life as a pilgrimage of the soul toward our true *telos*—our true aim, our true goal, our true end: union with God. Before contemporary Christianity was taken over by modern pragmatism and deteriorated into a bland religious form of self-improvement programs, the robust spirituality of earlier ages placed a primary emphasis on spiritual formation. For us to become the people God created us to be, we must embark on a journey toward spiritual maturity—a pilgrimage of the soul, if you will. This pilgrimage toward a properly developed soul is a lifelong project, and quite possibly a project that continues into the life to come. None of

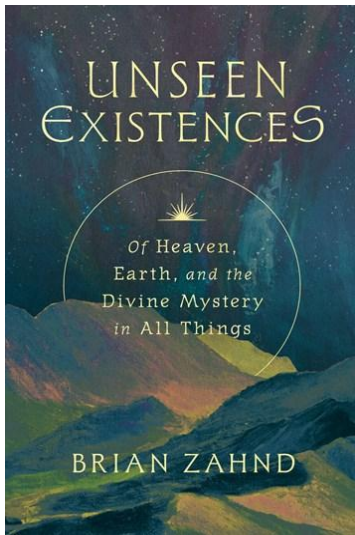


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this is a new idea. In attempting to do my tiny bit to help Christianity have a flourishing presence as it enters its third millennium, I am largely drawing on the ideas and praxis of an earlier time—a time before heaven and the soul were sidelined for what are considered more pragmatic concerns.

Gregory of Nazianzus (329–390), sometimes known as Gregory the Theologian, in an Easter sermon spoke of the human being as the nexus between the two worlds—the visible and invisible. In thrilling and robust theological language—so characteristic of the early church fathers and mothers, and so appallingly absent in modern sermon craft—the Theologian said this:

The great Architect of the universe conceived and produced a being endowed with both natures, visible and invisible. . . . He created a being at once earthly and heavenly, insecure and immortal, visible and invisible, halfway between greatness and nothingness, flesh and spirit at the same time . . . an animal en route to another native land, and, most mysterious of all, made to resemble God by simple submission to the divine will. (Olivier Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism: Texts from the Patristic Era with Commentary*, 2nd ed. [New City Press, 1993], 77)

Pope Benedict XVI said something similar when he observed that “human persons are beings en route, beings characterized by transition. They are not yet themselves; they must ultimately become themselves” (Pope Benedict XVI, *In the Beginning . . . : A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and Fall* [Eerdmans, 1995], 49). We human pilgrims are en route to becoming ourselves, and we’re on a journey to another native land—we’re on a pilgrimage of the soul toward our true home in heaven. Pilgrimage is an enduring metaphor—yet this is more than a metaphor. Pilgrimage may be the most accurate description regarding the proper relation of the soul to heaven while in this present world. At least the Bible thinks so. What are we in this life? We are pilgrims trying to find our way to the heavenly home of union with God—the home where we belong but have not yet been.

Yet we should not assume that a life lived any way we choose will automatically lead us home—we must submit to the divine will. As Jesus warned, there are roads that lead to ruin. And here I concur with C. S. Lewis when he remarked, “I do not think that all who choose wrong roads perish; but their rescue consists of being put back on the right road” (C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* [HarperOne, 1946], viii). Though to many a modern reader the idea of life consisting of roads that lead either to home or ruination may seem little more than the quaint superstition of a bygone epoch, this is precisely how our venerable forebears thought of their lives in this transient world.

—taken from the Prelude



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Brian Zahnd is the founder and lead pastor of Word of Life Church in St. Joseph, Missouri. Known for his theologically informed preaching and his embrace of the deep and long history of the church, Zahnd is a frequent speaker at conferences, universities, and seminaries around the world.

Taking Transcendence Seriously

What prompted you to write *Unseen Existences*? Was there a particular moment or experience that made you realize the need for this book?

Brian Zahnd: I began to notice that with a desire for a “this world” faith (a desire with which I concur) many theological circles had overcorrected to the point that heaven had gone missing from any serious consideration. But without heaven as the spiritual world of unseen existences, Christian theology is rendered incoherent. Without metaphysics, Christianity is reduced to mere ethics. Or to put it more severely, Christianity without transcendence degenerates into politics. This was my motivation for writing *Unseen Existences*.

What is core message of *Unseen Existences*?

Brian: Many of us have pushed back against “escapist” theology—a shallow version of Christianity that reduces salvation to a reservation for the afterlife. Because this pie-in-the-sky, I’ll-fly-away-when-I-die, in-the-sweet-by-and-by theology of heaven is unconcerned with God’s good earth or issues of justice in this life, we’ve embraced an earthly Christian faith that informs and influences our entire life—including our ethics and politics. Amen!

And yet, in our zeal to embrace a faith for this world, I warn that many of us have overcorrected and lost sight of heaven. And this is a fatal mistake. For if Christianity is to have a compelling message in the twenty-first century it must once again speak confidently, if humbly, about the reality of the spiritual world—the reality of unseen existences.

Unseen Existences invites us to remember heaven, to experience and embrace the divine mystery of the spiritual realm in this lifetime. This pilgrimage of the soul—this slow and steady progression of a deeper Christian faith that draws us nearer to God—embraces a love for both the heavenly and the earthly.

Many people today struggle with belief in anything beyond the material. How would you invite skeptics or disenchanted Christians to rediscover the “unseen”?

Brian: To quote Nick Cave, “We must take our subtle spiritual intuitions seriously and view them as the quintessence that underlies the ordinary world.” Philosophical materialism has the embarrassing problem of being unable to account for matter itself. Most people are capable of recognizing that meaning must be derived from something that transcends the material world. If all there is is matter, not much really matters. I encourage people to lean into what they already intuit in the deepest part of their being.



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Q & A



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How do you see this book fitting into your broader body of work?

Brian: In many ways *Unseen Existences* is the natural successor to *When Everything's on Fire*.

If readers only take away one thing from *Unseen Existences*, what do you hope that one thing is?

Brian: I'm going to be ambitious and hope that readers can take away two things from *Unseen Existences*: Our true home is in the unseen world of heaven, and life is a pilgrimage of the soul toward our true home of union with God.



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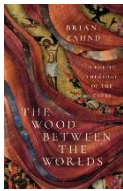
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In Unseen Existences, bestselling author and pastor Brian Zahnd invites us to remember heaven, to experience and embrace the divine mystery of the spiritual realm in this lifetime. This slow and steady progression of a deeper Christian faith that draws us nearer to God—a “pilgrimage of the soul”—fosters in us a love for both the heavenly and the earthly.

Bestselling Author Looks at Heaven Afresh

Brian Zahnd is the founder and lead pastor of Word of Life Church in St. Joseph, Missouri. Known for his theologically informed preaching and his embrace of the deep and long history of the church, Zahnd is a frequent speaker at conferences, universities, and seminaries around the world. He is enthusiastic about music, literature, mountains, and long-distance pilgrimages.

As a pastor-theologian, he is the author of numerous titles, including



[The Wood Between the Worlds: A Poetic Theology of the Cross](#)
216 pages | hardcover | 978-1-5140-0562-0

Brian Zahnd reminds us that the meaning of the cross is multifaceted and should touch every aspect of our lives. Just as gazing through the eyepiece of a kaleidoscope reveals a new geometric image with every turn, Zahnd helps us see that there are infinite ways to behold the cross of Christ as the beautiful form that saves the world.



[When Everything's on Fire: Faith Forged from the Ashes](#)
192 pages | hardcover | 978-1-5140-0333-6

Written with personal and pastoral experience, Zahnd extends an invitation to move beyond the crisis of faith toward the journey of reconstruction. As the world rapidly changes in ways that feel incompatible with Christianity, *When Everything's on Fire* provides much-needed hope.

as well as *Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God*, *A Farewell to Mars*, and *Beauty Will Save the World*.

Brian has been featured at

- *The Atlantic*,
- *Theology in the Raw*,
- *Religion News Service*,
- *Christian Century*,
- [Christianity Today](#),
- [Outreach Magazine](#),
- and more.

See more at Brian's website, <https://brianzahnd.com/>.



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