

Heaven comes to us

When Acts says Jesus is "taken up to heaven," this is not a spatial claim.

by [Thomas G. Long](#) in the [May 3, 2011](#) issue



Colton Burpo poses with his dad's book, *Heaven Is for Real*.

For many thoughtful Christians, meaningful language about heaven has fallen steadily from their grasp. In a scientific age, "heaven" as a place where God reigns and people go when they die has gradually slipped the moorings of plausibility. In 1941, Rudolf Bultmann, his sledgehammer poised against the foundations of the three-story cosmos, confidently said, "There is no longer any heaven in the traditional sense." The official 1930s hymnbook in my denomination included over a dozen hymns on heaven. The current hymnal's index doesn't even list the category.

Good riddance—at least according to an increasing chorus of voices. N. T. Wright recently argued that any thought that Christian hope is about "going to heaven" is biblically unsupported, theologically bankrupt and ethically corrosive. Jesus scholar Marcus Borg once told an audience, "If I were to make a list of Christianity's ten worst contributions to religion, on that list would be popular Christianity's emphasis on the afterlife."

More recently, media-savvy pastor Rob Bell published *Love Wins: A Book about Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*, in which he dismisses traditional evangelical notions of heaven and hell, calling them "misguided and

toxic." When advance word leaked about Bell's new book, outraged conservatives pummeled him with what the *New York Times* called "a biblical hailstorm of Twitter messages and blog posts."

Yet the hope of heaven dies hard in the popular imagination. Polls show that nine out of ten Americans believe in heaven, regardless of religious affiliation, and 85 percent are persuaded that they "will personally go there."

Even more impressive is the astonishing success of Todd Burpo's *Heaven Is for Real*, which has topped the *New York Times* best-seller lists for several months. Burpo, pastor of a small Nebraska church, tells of how he and his wife nearly lost their three-year-old son Colton because of misdiagnosed appendicitis. The couple experienced the fear, rage and anxiety any parents would feel as their child came perilously close to death—and all of the relief and renewed faith when his life seemed to be miraculously spared.

Burpo then describes how Colton began to tell a mind-boggling story of having been transported from the operating table into heaven. He described his great-grandfather "Pop," dead for more than 30 years, and a sister who died in a miscarriage that Colton had never been told about. He also encountered John the Baptist and saw God and Jesus sitting on enormous thrones. Heaven, he said, is "for real."

The fact that Colton's heaven has all of the trappings of a fundamentalist vision, including pearly gates and a blue-eyed Jesus, raises a skeptical eyebrow. The fact that the book was ghostwritten by Lynn Vincent, who penned Sarah Palin's *Going Rogue*, raises the other eyebrow. Colton, now 11, seems like a sweet kid, but I came away from this book thinking that either he was carried in an out-of-body experience to a biblical wax museum in Gatlinburg, Tennessee, or he's been channeling images from his father's sermons back to his credulous parents. Cathal Kelly of the *Toronto Star* scoffs that the book is for "the sort of people who see angels in chicken salad. [Colton has] written a book that will be shelved under 'non-fiction' south of the Mason-Dixon Line."

But charity should prevail. The book's unexpected popularity tells us something. In sober moments of reflection, our culture may find talk of heaven implausible, but in moments of need, it finds the hope of heaven irresistible.

All the more welcome, then, amidst these conflicting impulses, to have theologian Christopher Morse's superb and profound new monograph, *The Difference Heaven Makes: Rehearing the Gospel as News* (see ["Take & read: Theology"](#)). Morse combs meticulously through the biblical evidence, observing that in the Gospels heaven is mainly "not about blue skies or life only after death." Rather, heaven is the life that is now coming toward us from God, the life "of the world to come," a life that overcomes our present age. The opposite of heaven is not hell, but instead the "world that is passing away."

In Acts, when Jesus is "taken up to heaven," this is not a spatial claim, but an announcement that Jesus has been taken up "into the very life that is now forthcoming toward us." Heaven is God's unbounded love breaking in to every situation, stronger than any loss, even death. We don't go to heaven; heaven comes to us. "In sum," Morse writes, "we are called to be *on* hand for that which is *at* hand but not *in* hand, an unprecedented glory of not being left orphaned but of being loved in a community of new creation beyond all that we can ask or imagine."

Some day when Colton Burpo rereads his father's book with adult and perhaps skeptical eyes, I hope he will know that even if he did not go to heaven as a three-year-old, heaven comes to him every day and enfolds him in unfathomable love.