

*Engaging the Bible's Truth
About Life to Come*



THE
HEAVEN
PROMISE

SCOT McKNIGHT

Praise for
The Heaven Promise

“I’m genuinely excited by *The Heaven Promise*. With so many fascinated by the conversation of heaven and even near-death experiences, McKnight calls us to see heaven through the lens of Scripture and the redemption story of God in Christ. It’s both theologically robust and very accessible. This book speaks to pastors and leaders in the church as well as to parishioners in the pews. What a gift!”

—REV. EUGENE CHO, senior pastor, Quest Church, and author of
*OVERRATED: Are We More in Love with the Idea of Changing the
World Than Actually Changing the World?*

“This book—grounded in solid research and biblical interpretation—actually stirs up a longing for heaven. It’s a busting up of stereotypes and misconceptions. Thank you, Scot McKnight, for painting a picture of a place I would actually love to be for eternity!”

—NANCY BEACH, leadership coach with Slingshot Group, and author
of *Gifted to Lead: The Art of Leading as a Woman in the Church*

“What a terrific book! Scot lays out the great questions about heaven—What will it be like? Who’s going there?—and seeks to address them with biblically grounded wisdom.”

—JOHN ORTBERG, senior pastor, Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, and
author of *All the Places to Go*

“Fanciful visions and imaginative opinions of heaven are all around us. Thankfully Scot McKnight moves us beyond the realm of wishes to the great promise of heaven given us by God. With wit, care, and fine biblical insight, this book offers a clear understanding of the hope we have for life with God in a heavenly kingdom far better than we can imagine. *The Heaven Promise* is a gift to the church.”

—VINCENT BACOTE, PHD, director, Center for Applied Christian
Ethics, Wheaton College

“I serve in a community where hopelessness and resilience coexist and the constant reality of death looms daily. Hope and clarity about heaven’s promise are truly needed to empower the church, especially among those most affected by these realities. Scot McKnight helps the church to realize God’s truth about the life to come. This brings hope for us in the now.”

—PASTOR PHIL JACKSON, MDIV, associate pastor of Lawndale Christian Community Church; lead pastor of The House, Christ-Centered Hip-Hop Worship Service; and founder and chief visionary officer of the Firehouse Community Art Center

“Scot McKnight’s timely words help us understand the importance of God’s Heaven Promise at a time when the world—and the church—is reeling from one tragedy after another. His biblical approach firmly grounds the imagination, reminding us that God is All in All. I agree with Scot that everything hinges on the resurrection of Jesus, and that means not only the heaven to come, but also the way heaven people live now. We cannot know everything about heaven now, but what we can understand makes us want to say with the apostle John, ‘Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!’”

—DR. KENT BRANTLY, Ebola survivor and co-author of *Called for Life*

THE
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PROMISE



BOOKS BY SCOT MCKNIGHT

The Jesus Creed: Loving God, Loving Others

*Embracing Grace: Discovering the Gospel that Restores Us to God,
Creation, and Ourselves*

Praying with the Church: Following Jesus Daily, Hourly, Today

The Blue Parakeet: Rethinking How You Read the Bible

Fasting

One Life: Jesus Calls, We Follow

The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited

Kingdom Conspiracy: Returning to the Radical Mission of the Local Church

A Fellowship of Differents: Showing the World God's Design for Life Together

*Engaging the Bible's Truth
About Life to Come*

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SCOT McKNIGHT



WATERBROOK
P R E S S

THE HEAVEN PROMISE

PUBLISHED BY WATERBROOK PRESS

12265 Oracle Boulevard, Suite 200

Colorado Springs, Colorado 80921

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Italics in Scripture quotations reflect the author's added emphasis.

Details in some anecdotes and stories have been changed to protect the identities of the persons involved.

Hardcover ISBN 978-1-60142-628-4

eBook ISBN 978-1-60142-630-7

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Cover design by Kristopher K. Orr

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Published in the United States by WaterBrook Multnomah, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

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Excerpts in Chapter 14 are taken from *Forgiving Our Fathers and Mothers: Finding Freedom from Hurt and Hate* by Leslie Leyland Fields and Dr. Jill Hubbard. Copyright © 2014 by Leslie Fields and Dr. Jill Hubbard. Used by permission of Thomas Nelson. www.thomasnelson.com. All rights reserved.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

McKnight, Scot.

The heaven promise : engaging the Bible's truth about life to come / Scot McKnight—First Edition.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-60142-628-4—ISBN 978-1-60142-630-7 (electronic) 1. Heaven—Christianity. I. Title.

BT846.3.M348 2015

236'.24—dc23

2015017200

Printed in the United States of America

2015—First Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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*For my aging parents:
Alex and Lois McKnight,
who think about Heaven*

Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.
Amen.

— THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER

Contents

PART 1: THE HEAVEN QUESTION

- 1. Surprising Places 3
- 2. Imaginations of the Imaginative 9

PART 2: THE HEAVEN PROMISE

- 3. Heaven, It's a Promise! 17
- 4. The Heart of the Promise 26
- 5. The Christian Belief 34
- 6. Heaven: In Heaven or on Earth?. 42
- 7. Facing Death Standing in the Empty Tomb 51

PART 3: GOD'S SIX PROMISES ABOUT HEAVEN

- 8. The First Promise: God Will Be God 59
- 9. The Second Promise: Jesus Will Be Jesus 68
- 10. The Third Promise: Heaven Will Be the Utopia of Pleasures 76
- 11. The Fourth Promise: Heaven Will Be Eternal Life. 82
- 12. The Fifth Promise: Heaven Will Be an Eternal
Global Fellowship. 91
- 13. The Sixth Promise: Heaven Will Be an Eternal
Beloved Community 103
- 14. The First Hour in Heaven 114
- 15. How Should Heaven People Live Today?. 122

PART 4: TEN QUESTIONS ABOUT HEAVEN

16. What About Near-Death Experiences? 139

17. What About Rewards in Heaven? 145

18. Who Will Be in Heaven? 151

19. Is God Fair? 158

20. Will There Be Families? 162

21. What About Children Who Die? 171

22. What About Cremation? 176

23. What About Purgatory? 179

24. Will There Be Pets in Heaven? 183

25. Why Believe in Heaven? 187

After Words 197

Notes 199

Part One



THE HEAVEN QUESTION

Visit a local bookshop or Google “heaven,” and you will quickly discover that heaven is an intense human-interest story. In fact, a shelf or two of books about heaven are published each year. Add to these the stories of near-death experiences, and we have the makings of Hollywood movies about heaven.

Many are asking what I call The Heaven Question: Is there a heaven after we die or not? That question, of course, leads to others, such as: Who will be there? Will I be there? What will heaven be like?

But others are asking an entirely different question: Shouldn't we be focusing on life now and living for the kingdom now and making the kingdom more of a reality now?

That question must be answered with a firm yes, but before we move on, we have to get a stronger grip on what the Bible means by the word *heaven*. Once we do, not only can we be firm in our yes, but we can also learn how Heaven people ought to live today.

Talk about heaven excites the imagination of many people, some of whom just might surprise you.



Surprising Places

Some Children, an Atheist, Authors, a Movie Star, and Questions

Guesses, of course, only guesses. If they are not true,
something better will be.

— C. S. Lewis

Even in a world where religious faith is in decline, when someone asks, “Is there a heaven?” most people have an answer or at least a guess. Some are astonishingly bold about what they think heaven will be like and who will be there. We often hear responses that surprise us. Children, for instance, often think about heaven.

When I was a child, I asked my mother if something I liked at that time would be in heaven. Her response was simple and memorable: “If it will make you happy, it will be in heaven.” Little did I know she had something up her sleeve with the word “happy.”

One Sunday, sitting in the front row at church (and for some reason my mother was next to me and not in the choir loft), the pastor, who had taken up golf, said, “I have learned to enjoy golf, but I wonder if there will be room in heaven for golf.” Afterward I said to Mother, “I know there will be golf in heaven.” She asked, “How do you know that?” I responded, “Because it will make me happy.”

She gave me the kind of look that indicated that the pastor was probably right and that I should retool my sense of what I needed to make me happy.

When that great theologian and Christian martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his twin sister Sabine were children, they nightly put themselves to sleep pondering the word *eternity*. World War I was in motion; Bonhoeffer's oldest brother, Walter, died in that war; and his mother was staggered by Walter's death. Death filled their not particularly religious home. Bonhoeffer later admitted that he could be obsessed with dying a good death. To cope with his fears—and amid the phosphorescent crosses that gleamed in their room—the twins would utter aloud “eternity” to make it their only thought. When Dietrich got his own room at age twelve, lying in his bed he would tap on the wall that separated the twins and the tap meant “think of God.”¹

AN ATHEIST

Not all who talk about heaven are as serious as the young Bonhoeffer twins. When an atheist takes on heaven we might do well to listen. Julian Barnes, in his book *A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters*, lampoons those who think they know about heaven.² Barnes imagines his own kind of heaven. In this imagined place, he gets to have multiple breakfasts in bed and long, long baths. He does everything on his bucket list: cruises, exploring a jungle, some painting. He falls in love a number of times with many different women, and he meets every important footballer. But in his guesses, Barnes has noted, after a time there is a strange absence: there is no God in heaven.

So Barnes has a conversation with Margaret, his imagined guide.

“I don't want to sound ungrateful,” I said cautiously, “but where's God?”

“God. Do you want God? Is that what you want?” . . .

“I didn't think it depended on me in any way.”

“Of course it does.”

Then Barnes provides an alarming, but brutally honest, description of so much speculation about heaven these days.

“Heaven is democratic these days,” she said. Then added, “Or at least, it is if you want it to be.”

“What do you mean, democratic?”

“We don’t impose Heaven on people anymore,” she said. “We listen to their needs. If they want it, they can have it; if not, not. And then of course they get the sort of Heaven they want.”

“And what sort do they want on the whole?”

“Well, they want a continuation of life, that’s what we find. But . . . better. . . .”

“Sex, golf, shopping, dinner, meeting famous people and not feeling bad?” I asked a bit defensively.³

We need this Mark Twain–like lampooning of what we would like heaven to be because it forces us to take a deeper look at what we believe. Is heaven nothing but projections of what we enjoy here and now? The British philosopher, David Hume, once told James Boswell that “he did not wish to be immortal.” Surprised, Boswell pushed for more. Why would he not want immortality? Hume said it was because “he was very well in this state of being, and that the chances were very much against his being so well in another state.”⁴

I suspect more people are like Barnes than Hume. People dream of heaven being the fulfillment of our longings and wishes, the healing of our hurts, and the answer to all our questions. We think of heaven as far more than delicious food and outstanding sex, more possessions, reunions with friends and family, more money and pleasure, and more glory.

AUTHORS

My friend and author Karen Spears Zacharias has a view of heaven too, and it’s close to mine. So, of course, I think (and hope) she’s right:

It’s hard to visualize Heaven. To be honest, streets of gold and gated communities don’t interest me much. And I only want a mansion if there is a staff like on *Downton Abbey* to take care of it.

My idea of heaven would be a home at the end of a dirt road on Mobile Bay. A place surrounded by white roses, a porch for pondering, and birds—redbirds, bluebirds, mockingbirds, and even a visit from [her own] Mama bird, every now and then.⁵

Lots of people think of heaven as a church service, or at least as Eternal Sundays. My wife, Kris, is an introvert. By Sunday at about noon she has had enough and needs a rest from all those people talking and singing and hugging and asking questions and telling stories and sometimes standing a bit too close. So Karen's heaven is Kris's kind of heaven too, though both would gladly toss in some kids and grandkids. Bring on the children and grandchildren, but at the end of a long road, quiet and peaceful. That's heavenly.

Here's how Ernest Hemingway described his idea of heaven in a 1925 letter to F. Scott Fitzgerald:

To me heaven would be a big bull ring with me holding two barrera seats and a trout stream outside that no one else was allowed to fish in and two lovely houses in the town; one where I would have my wife and children and be monogamous and love them truly and well and the other where I would have my nine beautiful mistresses on 9 different floors. . . . Then there would be a fine church like in Pamplona where I could go and be confessed on the way from one house to the other and I would get on my horse and ride out with my son to my bull ranch . . . and toss coins to all my illegitimate children that lived [along] the road.⁶

At least he's colorful in his ribald manliness and imagination.

A MOVIE STAR

Not only do we all have theories about what heaven is like, we are not afraid to announce who will be there and who won't be let in. Most vote against Hitler, and all but the grumps vote in Mother Teresa. The movie star Jane Fonda, who has never

hesitated to share her opinions publically, announced her decision on the eternal fate of her ex-husband, mega-millionaire Ted Turner. From CNN:

Fonda said she believes Turner's childhood traumas left him so protective of himself that he had trouble opening up emotionally. But, she said, he does want to get into heaven. And, she said, he's a shoo-in.

Finally, with our 23 minutes with Turner ticking down, we've gotten his full attention. We let [Ted] in on what Fonda has told CNN about his heavenly prospects:

"Given his childhood," Fonda said, "he should've become a dictator. He should've become a not nice person. The miracle is that he became what he is. A man who will go to heaven, and there'll be a lot of animals up there welcoming him, animals that have been brought back from the edge of extinction because of Ted. He's turned out to be a good guy. And he says he's not religious. But he, the whole time I was with him, every speech—and he likes to give speeches—he always ends his speech with 'God bless.' And he'll get into heaven. He's a miracle."

Turner listened intently. There was a long pause. Was he tearing up?

Finally, he spoke. "She said that?"

Another long pause. "Well, I sure don't want to go to hell." . . .

[Ted] has said he "can't see myself sitting on a cloud and playing the harp day in and day out." So what is Ted Turner's notion of heaven?

"Montana in the summer."⁷

Everyone seems to have a vivid imagination when it comes to heaven.

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE HEAVEN QUESTION

We ask in this surprising welter of guesses and opinions and hopes: How can we know what heaven will be like? (Read on.) Is heaven an illusion? (No, but sometimes it is.) Is it merely in our brains? (Sometimes.) Is it a grand projection of what we most want for our world? (For some, it is.) Is it a spiritual realm unlike what we

experience on earth? (In part.) Can we know who goes there (or who doesn't)? (Yes.) Is there a way to know about heaven in more detail? (Read on.)⁸ What about all the near-death experiences people are writing about and some are tempted to fabricate? (Keep reading.)

In what follows I want to sketch the most important ideas about heaven that come from the Bible. Then in the last section we will turn to the top ten questions about heaven. We can't answer most of the questions until we first get a solid grip on the big ideas about heaven. It is to those ideas that we now turn.