

A misty, golden-hour landscape with a wooden fence and trees. The scene is bathed in warm, soft light, creating a serene and ethereal atmosphere. The fence runs across the middle ground, and the trees are silhouetted against the bright, hazy background.

MARK  
BUCHANAN

THINGS  
UNSEEN

↳ LIVING IN LIGHT OF FOREVER ↳

# THINGS UNSEEN

MARK BUCHANAN



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I dedicate this book to all the saints,  
known and unknown,  
loved and hated,  
past, present, and future,  
who have lived their lives heaven-bent,  
joyful in the Things Unseen.

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EPIGRAPH

I have had a tremor of bliss, a wink of heaven, a whisper,  
And I would no longer be denied; all things  
Proceed to a joyful consummation.

*T. S. Eliot*

## INTRODUCTION

# THE BIG FIX

I'm dying.

Sometimes I forget that.

Don't misunderstand: I am not, at present, suffering from a terminal illness or a mortal wound. I have no virus breeding, thick and septic, in my bloodstream, no genetic disease swarming, swift and capricious, in my flesh. I am not, to my knowledge, dying soon.

But I am, as the apostle Paul puts it, "outwardly wasting away" (see 2 Corinthians 4:16). That's what I sometimes forget: my mortality, my frailty, my life's brevity. *I will be the exception*, I think, the one who evades death at each turn, slips its every snare, snatches hold of Elijah's chariot or Enoch's robe and, whisked into the wild blue yonder, remains unscathed by the grim reaper's scythe.

But that's laughable: I'm dying, and you're dying, and that's that.



Is there a way to remember this and not be consumed by it? Can I live life to the full when life is often not full—when it's many times broken, empty, scattered, pain-filled, when its beauties are so transitory, its pleasures so vaporous, its hard luck so tenacious? Must I, with all the trouble I'm already in, also remember that I'm dying?

Yes.

And no.

That's what this book is about: the yes and the no.

This book is about heaven, and yet not. It is about our longing for heaven, our instinct for it. It is about eternity in our hearts. It is about the groaning inside us that is both an acknowledgment of and a protest against death, and at the same time a cry for something else, for that which is beyond the grave, stronger and larger than it, more enduring. It is about our yearning for Things Unseen. It is about wanting heaven.

We groan waiting for it. Words cannot express these groans—that's why we groan—but I've set out to lay this yearning down in words anyway, to map the wild rough terrain of our everlasting desire and our desire for the everlasting. I've ventured to name the Things Unseen. And I've attempted to train us in skills for fixing our eyes on them—the unseen realities—so that we do not lose heart.

Not that I wish the groaning to cease. My hope, indeed, is that it deepens. My hope is that we learn to join our groaning, pitch for pitch and rhythm for rhythm, to the groaning of all creation—earth and sky, waterfall and water buffalo, chickadee and katydid, stone and tree—to all things as they wait for the sons of God to be revealed (see

Romans 8:22). Groaning is creation's song, the blues of the cosmos, and we're to hum its melody and take up its chorus.

So this is a book not about heaven, but about heavenly-mindedness. It's about how the *hope* of heaven inspires and sustains passion and purpose in this life and on this earth. And it's about learning the biblical lexicon and discipline for bringing heaven near—for fixing our hearts and our minds on things above.

We're heaven-bent. I mean by that a number of things: that our hearts have an inner tilt upward, that the grain of our souls leans heavenward, that in Christ we have a sure destination, which powers larger than ourselves carry us toward. I mean it in contrast to being hell-bent. But before any of that, I mean that we're all cockeyed, bent out of shape, with missing heaven. And we miss it in both senses of the word: We wish for it, yet go astray of it. We have a hunger for things above, but our skill for filling that hunger has atrophied. We're like a lapcat—still with the instinct for catching mice, but lacking the reflexes—whose pampered existence has made it slow and lazy, inept at stalking, clumsy at pouncing. It rarely catches its prey, if even it stirs to notice the prey in its midst. We're like that with heaven: We long for it, but we've lost the tautness and alertness, the agility and quickness, to satisfy the longing. We've grown lethargic. We've become so earthly-minded we're of no heavenly good.

So we need to relearn the skill of fixing our eyes on Things Unseen.

*Fixing.* The word in English has a playful ambiguity. It means to mend: to *fix* a leaky faucet. It means to fasten: to *fix* a bracket to a

shelf. It means to rig, to tamper with, to prearrange: to *fix* the game. In the Greek, the verb *skopē*—"to fix"—doesn't carry this diversity of meanings. It simply connotes an intensity of gaze—a determined, attentive searching out. But the range of meanings in our own language is a happy accident, or a fugitive providence. When we fix our hearts and minds on things above, we practice all three things at once: We mend—we *fix*—our wayward attention, our inbred distractedness, our myopia; we fasten—we *fix*—that attention to unseen realities; and we rig—we *fix*—things so that, more and more, we glimpse heaven in places and situations where before we saw only shadows and surfaces.

Heaven is meant to be our *fixation*—our Big Fix. It's to be our deep secret, like being in love, where just the thought of it carries us through menial chores or imparts to us courage in the face of danger. We fix on it, and it fixes us.

This book is an attempt to help us in that *fixation*: to uncover eternity in our hearts, to recover the hope of forever, and to discover what makes us so heavenly-minded that we're of much earthly good.

May you ever after be heaven-bent, your eyes fixed on Things Unseen, and convinced of this: Even though I die, yet shall I live.

Shalom,

Mark Buchanan

January 2002

PART I

HEAVEN-HAUNTED:  
MISSING THINGS  
UNSEEN

# ETERNITY IN OUR HEARTS

I have a memory that lives in me now like the ache of an old wound, like shrapnel closed up in my flesh. It is of my mother and father laughing. Laughter spills from them, candy from a burst piñata, and my brother and I scramble to be part of it, to get a handful, a mouthful, a life full.

We are on holiday. My father, whose work to him was often a heaviness and a dreariness, is light from two weeks of rest and play and silence. His chronic irritability, his swift, jerky snapping at things, is gone. He often looked as if he was constantly fighting invisible restraints—a failed Houdini who, no matter how much he thrust and twisted to loose the ropes and chains, couldn't slip free. But his usual motions of rigid haste have slowed and smoothed, and the things that three weeks ago would have made him explode in anger or withdraw

in sullenness now just make him shrug or chuckle. My mother has relaxed into my father's softening mood. She has almost collapsed into it, thankful, weary, only now realizing how close she herself was to breaking.

We're in a cabin beside the sea, and it's morning. The sun comes up hot, sweet. It shimmers bright on the skin of things. Light pours into the room; even the shadows brim with it. The small cabin fills up with the smells of coffee and maple bacon and buttered toast. You can sleep in if you want, but no one wants to. My father is busy in the kitchen, cooking, singing. My mother is on the deck of the cabin, reading. She comes in.

Something goes wrong. I don't remember what. The toast burns, or the coffee spills, or something breaks. In the huge shuddering silence that follows, I brace myself for anger, shouting, accusation.

But my parents laugh. It's a sound so pure that it could be grief. Wind chimes and birdsong and jingling coins and splashing brooks. Ancient holy secrets revealed, fresh news of triumph borne in on the wind. Fire and water and earth and air.

Laughter.

In that laughter, in the clean deep wide-openness of it, all things are possible. All things are forgotten, or remembered, accepted, forgiven, relinquished. That laughter is a sign as consoling as a fig branch in a dove's beak, a promise as dazzling as a rainbow arched over a world washed fresh. It is a pledge that the earth will not be destroyed as before.

I remember that.

It haunts me now.

My father is dead. He was talking on the phone one day—to the cardiologist, ironically—and his heart seized up. He pressed his hand hard to his chest, and staggered to where my mother sat in the other room. He sat down, gasping like a caught fish, and she stood up and phoned the ambulance. But the damage was too massive. He died shortly after, in the hospital.

I was on an island, on the first day of three weeks of holidays. My wife and I had just put the children to bed and unpacked the groceries. We were sitting down, making tea. A knock on the door. I answered. A man I didn't know was standing there holding a piece of paper.

“Are you Mark?”

“Yes.”

“You're to phone your brother.”

The man gave me the paper and walked off, a shadow among falling shadows. My brother's phone number was on the paper. He was scheduled to come with his family to visit us the next day. Things come up all the time—cars break down, unexpected guests arrive, extra work waylays us, interruptions delay us—so this message at nightfall should not have startled me, should not have filled me with any particular foreboding. But it did. Somehow I knew.

I walked down to the government wharf to the pay phone. I dialed the number. My brother answered, first ring, his voice thin and flat like the edge of hammered metal.

“Dad's dead. He had a heart attack. I guess there was nothing they could do.”

I don't remember much else. I remember putting the phone down gently, as I might have a porcelain figurine, and then waiting in the quietness of the phone booth, not wanting to turn around. Not knowing what to do. Then walking up the hill to the cottage and my wife coming down, somehow knowing too.

"My dad died," I said. We held each other and cried.

My mother lives with her cats now. Often she talks to them as if they were people, very young people or very old people, people she feels the need to scold and dote on all at once. Her cats are aging, arthritic, mangy, glaucomatous. They hiss at children and hobble as they walk. My mother watches documentaries on television, and her cats curl around her, shedding fistfuls of hair.

And me, living far away—I have more things to keep up with than I can keep up with, and some nights I don't sleep well: Some gnawing and tugging inside keeps me half-awake half the night. I shed most of my hair when I was still young. My teeth are crooked; I never got that fixed, and now it's too late. The phone rings morning till night with grating and merciless urgency, and very seldom is it someone just wanting to say "I love you" (my mother still does that, though). Now I have e-mail, too, and each morning a new landslide of messages, much of it dirt and stone, tumbles in, threatening to engulf me. At any given time—I learned this several years ago now—someone somewhere is angry at or disappointed with me.

That bright summer when, in the fullness of their youth and mine, my parents laughed, is an archetypal myth to me now. It is a memory that became a dream that became a haunting. Thinking on



it, I am both happy and sad. At once. It's almost too painful to remember and certainly too beautiful to forget. It speaks more things to me than I can know or explain.

It is eternity in my heart. It is a taste, however elusive, of some Other Thing, some Unseen Thing. It is a reminder that the world is not enough, and that every bone and cell in me knows that. It is a desire for something that earth can make me thirst for, but never quench.

There is a moment like that in Israel's history. The people have returned, straggle-wise, from exile and have begun to rebuild the destroyed temple. That destruction, at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonian warriors in 586 B.C., represents the nation's biggest tragedy: the loss of the center. It represents either the defeat of God, or God's abandonment of His people. Either prospect is a huge desolation, a grief bigger than time itself. It is a wound that never quite heals: shrapnel closed up in the flesh.

But the people are back, the rebuilding has begun, and the moment has come when the long-cherished hope first touches reality: The foundation is laid. Finished. There it is, as real as earth and fire. You can dance on it, if you want, or kiss it. It is a stone you could stumble over.

And that calls for a party. If there is one thing the Hebrew people knew how to do right, it was party.

When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments and with trumpets, and the Levites (the sons of Asaph) with cymbals, took their places to praise the LORD, as prescribed by David king of Israel. With praise and thanksgiving they sang to the LORD: “He is good; his love to Israel endures forever.” And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. (Ezra 3:10–11)

But the celebration is haunted. Something is amiss; literally, something is missing.

But many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy. No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise. And the sound was heard far away. (Ezra 3:12–13)

The archetype is this: All that weeping and laughing, heard a long way off, one indistinguishable from the other, is what we all feel at all our homecomings, all our foundation-layings. They are moments of great joy, and yet also sadness. Even the best foundations—even the first ones, the pristine ones—fall short of what we *remember*.

We know, and can't escape the knowing, that even when we

come home, we are still in exile and that all the foundations we lay, no matter how glorious and solid, are at best only shadows of what we hoped for.

By faith he made his home in the promised land *like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents*, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. (Hebrews 11:9–10, emphasis added)

Even in a land flowing with milk and honey, we live estranged, we dwell in tents. It simply doesn't matter how good earth gets or how much we experience our settlement here as promised land. No foundation we lay can take away our sense that we're not home yet. The apostle Paul puts it this way: "Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling" (2 Corinthians 5:1–2).

This is eternity in our hearts. This is being haunted with and wooed by Things Unseen.

*Things Unseen.* God calls us to live among them, to set our sights on them, to treasure them against all sorrow, loss, doubt, disappointment.

But isn't that escapism?

No. It's the truest realism.

J. R. R. Tolkien was often accused of writing escapist literature, of conjuring up a world that indulged the human longing to slip the boredom and burden of living our nine-to-five, hand-to-mouth, this-and-that lives. His answer was that there are two kinds of escape.

The first is the escape of one who is running away from life, who can't endure its disappointments and responsibilities. It's the painter Paul Gauguin, who abandoned his wife and children to try to capture some earthly paradise in Tahiti, or Jean Jacques Rousseau, who kept dumping his illegitimate children in orphanages so he could pursue his ambitions to write about the perfection of child-rearing. This form of escape is hypocritical and pathetic.

But there is a second kind of escape. It is the escape of the prisoner of war, who seeks to break out of the grim, muddy compound, with its scowling guards, its snarling dogs, its shockingly dreadful threats and numbingly dull routines, its guns and fleas and gruel. All he wants—and it is a huge want, able to carry him when nothing else can—is to go home. This form of escape keeps us human.

Tolkien said that he was writing about the second kind of escapism, not the first.<sup>1</sup>

If heavenly-mindedness is a form of escapism, it is of the second kind: a remembrance and an expectancy—a groaning for home. A longing that sustains us no matter how dark it gets.

Heavenly-mindedness is sanity. It is the best regimen for keeping our hearts whole, our minds clear. It allows us to enjoy earth's pleasures without debauchery. It allows us to endure life's agonies without

despair. It allows us to see things from the widest possible perspective and in the truest possible proportions. If anything can give us a true scale of values—one that enables us to sort out the disposable from the precious, the trinkets from the treasures, the surface from the substance—heavenly-mindedness can.

The church has lost this, and our losing it has happened with little dismay and hardly any remark. We live, in A. J. Conyers's phrase, beneath the "eclipse of heaven."<sup>2</sup> When we feel mildly provoked to justify this, we do so with the shopworn slogan: You don't want to become so heavenly-minded that you're of no earthly good.

You'd sooner find an atheist in a foxhole or a Green Peace activist on a foxhunt than find a Christian, living or dead, fitting that description. Biblically and historically, the exact opposite is true: Those who have cultivated a genuine heavenly-mindedness—who have named and nurtured the human longing for Elsewhere and Otherwise—have been people who have worked and prayed the most passionately, courageously, tirelessly, and unswervingly for the kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven.

C. S. Lewis notes:

If you read history, you will find that the Christians who did the most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. The apostles themselves, who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English evangelicals who abolished the slave trade, all left their mark on earth, precisely because their

minds were occupied with heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed.

Only those who fill their hearts and minds with heaven can want or even recognize its earthly counterpart. Only they can seek after it in a way that indulges neither utopian dreams nor despotic solutions. To be of real earthly good requires a certain fearlessness: a freedom from the fear of death, from the loss of property or status or title or comfort, from the threat of tyrants, the power of armies, the day of trouble.

People fixated on earth generally do not have this deep taproot of courage and conviction. Seldom do they stand down Pharaohs, Caesars, Stalins, with nothing but a stick in their hand or a cross on their back. Nor do they generally look after widows and orphans in distress or care for the dying or feed the hungry. This is left for the heavenly-minded to do—for the Stephens, whose serving meals to widows and confronting the powers of the age were all of a piece, and who, at the very edge of his brutal execution, “looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God” (Acts 7:55).

Like the tug and heft of a huge unseen planet hovering near, the hope of heaven is meant to exert a gravitational pull that gives our lives stability, substance, weight. Ironically, it alone has the power to give us in a sustained way the moral and spiritual ballast needed to keep our feet on the earth—to make us of much earthly good. It is a

rumor of home in a place of exile, inspiring us to keep up the good work.

It is Unseen Things that render the things we do see—both the beauty and the ugliness, the grandeur and the barrenness, never enough, and yet never too much.



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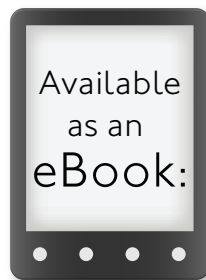
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