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TODD BURPO
with LYNN VINCENT

Heaven is for Real

A Little Boy's Astounding Story of His Trip to Heaven and Back

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MOTION
PICTURE**



PRAISE FOR HEAVEN IS FOR REAL

“You will be moved by the honest, simple, childlike accounts of a little boy who has been to heaven. It’s compelling and convincing. It’s a book you should read. If you’re ready to go to heaven, this book will inspire you. If you’re not ready for heaven, allow a little child to lead you. Like Colton says, *Heaven Is for Real*.”

— Don Piper
Speaker and Author, *90 Minutes
in Heaven*

“Every now and again a manuscript comes across my desk where the title intrigues me. That’s what happened with this particular book called *Heaven Is for Real*. I thought I’d just skim through it, but I couldn’t put it down. I read it from cover to cover. I was so impacted by the story. It’s a book that will not only make you love God more and fear death less, but it will help you understand that heaven is not a place where we just sit around for a thousand years singing Kumbaya; it’s a place where we begin to live as we were always meant to live, before the fall. If heaven is something that intrigues you, or troubles you, if you wonder what our lives will be like, then I highly recommend this book.”

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Speaker and Author,
*Beautiful Things Happen When
a Woman Trusts God*

“Heaven is not a consolation prize. It is a real place that will be the eternal home for all who believe. Take a journey with Colton and Todd as they describe firsthand the wonders, mysteries, and majesty of heaven. It will make earth more meaningful and the future more hopeful.”

— Brady Boyd
Senior Pastor, New Life Church,
Colorado Springs

“There have been many stories of ‘near-death’ experiences that I simply have not read because I frankly didn’t know if I could trust the author. Well, I have read this book cover to cover and, moreover, I could hardly put it down! Why? Because I know the author and I believe him. Todd Burpo gives us a wonderful gift as he and his son lift the veil on eternity, allowing us a quick glimpse of what lies on the other side.”

— Dr. Everett
Piper President, Oklahoma Wesleyan
University
Author, *Why I’m a Liberal and
Other Conservative Ideas*

“In this beautiful and well-written book, Colton, age four, has an experience consistent with a near-death experience (NDE) while under anesthesia. I have scientifically studied over 1,600 NDEs, and found that typical NDEs may occur in very young children and while under anesthesia. Even after studying so many NDEs, I found Colton’s experience to be dramatic, exceptional, and an inspiration to Christians everywhere.”

— Jeffrey Long, MD
Founder, Near Death Experience
Research Foundation
Author, *Evidence of the Afterlife:
The Science of Near-Death
Experiences*

“A beautifully written glimpse into heaven that will encourage those who doubt and thrill those who believe.”

— Ron Hall
Coauthor, *Same Kind of
Different as Me*

“Some stories want to be told. They simply have a life of their own. The book you hold in your hand is just such a story. But it won’t stay long with you; it will bubble over into your conversations in search of someone who has not yet heard. I know it will happen to you because that is what happened to me.”

— Phil McCallum
Senior Pastor, Evergreen
Community Church
Bothell, Washington

“The Bible describes heaven as the dwelling place of God. It is a real place that all those who submit their lives to God will have as an eternal dwelling. In this book Todd Burpo relays the account of his son’s experience when he was in surgery for a burst appendix. It is honest and touching and encouraging to all of us who have an eternal hope.”

— Robert Morris
Pastor, Gateway Church,
Southlake, Texas

“*Heaven Is for Real* is a wonderful book. It reaffirms how important faith is in our lives—for children as well as adults.”

— Timothy P. O’Holleran, MD

“Colton’s story could have been in the New Testament—but God has chosen to speak to us in this twenty-first century through the unblemished eyes of a child, revealing some of the mysteries of heaven. The writing is compelling and the truth astonishing, creating a hunger for more.”

— Jo Anne Lyon
General Superintendent,
The Wesleyan Church

“God is so creative and credible! The discoveries of this book will amplify that in new ways. I’ve known Colton since birth. As a toddler, he already had a keen spiritual interest and intensity. At about age 3, he sat on my knee, looked me in the eyes and asked if I wanted to go to heaven when I died. Then told me “You need to have Jesus in your heart.” I commend this book as a fresh perspective on the reality of God, who often seems hidden yet interrupts on His schedule.”

— Phil Harris
District Superintendent,

Colorado-Nebraska District of
the Wesleyan Church

“It is always a blessing to hear that Akiane’s paintings have touched another person’s life. Her *Prince of Peace* depiction of Christ remains one of her most beloved works. And as parents of a child that has experienced something extraordinary and unexplained by earthly measures, I celebrate with this family in their joy and in the telling of their special story.”

— Forelli Kramarik
Coauthor, *Akiane: Her Life,
Her Heart, Her Poetry*

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A Little Boy's Astounding Story of His
Trip to Heaven and Back

Todd Burpo
with Lynn Vincent



NASHVILLE DALLAS MEXICO CITY RIO DE JANEIRO

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“I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

—JESUS OF NAZARETH

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Sonja and I count it a wonderful privilege to call them our friends.

PROLOGUE

Angels at Arby's

The Fourth of July holiday calls up memories of patriotic parades, the savory scents of smoky barbecue, sweet corn, and night skies bursting with showers of light. But for my family, the July Fourth weekend of 2003 was a big deal for other reasons.

My wife, Sonja, and I had planned to take the kids to visit Sonja's brother, Steve, and his family in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. It would be our first chance to meet our nephew, Bennett, born two months earlier. Plus, our kids, Cassie and Colton, had never been to the falls before. (Yes, there really is a Sioux Falls in Sioux Falls.) But the biggest deal of all was this: this trip would be the first time we'd left our hometown of Imperial, Nebraska, since a family trip to Greeley, Colorado, in March had turned into the worst nightmare of our lives.

To put it bluntly, the last time we had taken a family trip, one of our children almost died. Call us crazy, but we were a little apprehensive this time, almost to the point of not wanting to go. Now, as a pastor, I'm not a believer in superstition. Still, some weird, unsettled part of me felt that if we just hunkered down close to home, we'd be safe. Finally, though, reason—and the lure of meeting little Bennett, whom Steve had told us was the world's cutest baby—won out. So we packed up a weekend's worth of paraphernalia in our blue Ford Expedition and got our family ready to head north.

Sonja and I decided the best plan would be to get most of the driving done at night. That way, even though Colton would be strapped into his car seat against his four-year-old, I'm-a-big-kid will, at least he'd sleep for most of the trip. So it was a little after 8 p.m. when I backed the Expedition out of our driveway, steered past Crossroads Wesleyan Church, my pastorate, and hit Highway 61.

The night spread clear and bright across the plains, a half moon white against a velvet sky. Imperial is a small farming town tucked just inside the western border of Nebraska. With only two thousand souls and zero traffic lights, it's the kind of town with more churches than banks, where farmers stream straight off the fields into the family-owned café at lunchtime, wearing Wolverine work boots, John Deere ball caps, and a pair of pliers for fence-mending hanging off their hips. So Cassie, age six, and Colton were excited to be on the road to the "big city" of Sioux Falls to meet their newborn cousin.

The kids chattered for ninety miles to the city of North Platte, with Colton fighting action-figure superhero battles and saving the world several times on the way. It wasn't quite 10 p.m. when we pulled into the town of about twenty-four thousand, whose greatest claim to fame is that it was the hometown of the famous Wild West showman, Buffalo Bill Cody. North Platte would be about the last civilized stop—or at least the last *open* stop—we'd pass that night as we headed northeast across vast stretches of cornfields empty of everything but deer, pheasant, and an occasional farmhouse. We had planned in advance to stop there to top off both the gas tank and our bellies.

After a fill-up at a Sinclair gas station, we pulled out onto Jeffers Street, and I noticed we were passing through the traffic light where, if we turned left, we'd wind up at the Great Plains Regional Medical Center. That was where we'd spent fifteen nightmarish days in March, much of it on our knees, praying for God to spare Colton's life. God did, but Sonja and I joke that the experience shaved years off our own lives.

Sometimes laughter is the only way to process tough times, so as we passed the turnoff, I decided to rib Colton a little.

“Hey, Colton, if we turn here, we can go back to the hospital,” I said. “Do you wanna go back to the hospital?”

Our preschooler giggled in the dark. “No, Daddy, don’t send me! Send Cassie . . . Cassie can go to the hospital!”

Sitting next to him, his sister laughed. “Nuh-*uh*! I don’t wanna go either!”

In the passenger seat, Sonja turned so that she could see our son, whose car seat was parked behind mine. I pictured his blond crew cut and his sky-blue eyes shining in the dark. “Do you remember the hospital, Colton?” Sonja said.

“Yes, Mommy, I remember,” he said. “That’s where the angels sang to me.”

Inside the Expedition, time froze. Sonja and I looked at each other, passing a silent message: *Did he just say what I think he said?*

Sonja leaned over and whispered, “Has he talked to you about angels before?”

I shook my head. “You?”

She shook her head.

I spotted an Arby’s, pulled into the parking lot, and switched off the engine. White light from a street lamp filtered into the Expedition. Twisting in my seat, I peered back at Colton. In that moment, I was struck by his smallness, his little boyness. He was really just a little guy who still spoke with an endearing (and sometimes embarrassing) call-it-like-you-see-it innocence. If you’re a parent, you know what I mean: the age where a kid might point to a pregnant woman and ask (very loudly), “Daddy, why is that lady so fat?” Colton was in that narrow window of life where he hadn’t yet learned either tact or guile.

All these thoughts flashed through my mind as I tried to figure how to respond to my four-year-old’s simple proclamation that *angels* had sung to him. Finally, I plunged in: “Colton, you said that angels sang to you while you were at the hospital?”

He nodded his head vigorously.

“What did they sing to you?”

Colton turned his eyes up and to the right, the attitude of remembering. “Well, they sang ‘Jesus Loves Me’ and ‘Joshua Fought the Battle of Jericho,’” he said earnestly. “I asked them to sing ‘We Will, We Will Rock You,’ but they wouldn’t sing that.”

As Cassie giggled softly, I noticed that Colton’s answer had been quick and matter-of-fact, without a hint of hesitation.

Sonja and I exchanged glances again. *What’s going on? Did he have a dream in the hospital?*

And one more unspoken question: *What do we say now?*

A natural question popped into my head: “Colton, what did the angels look like?”

He chuckled at what seemed to be a memory. “Well, one of them looked like Grandpa Dennis, but it wasn’t him, ’cause Grandpa Dennis has glasses.”

Then he grew serious. “Dad, Jesus had the angels sing to me because I was so scared. They made me feel better.”

Jesus?

I glanced at Sonja again and saw that her mouth had dropped open. I turned back to Colton. “You mean Jesus was there?”

My little boy nodded as though reporting nothing more remarkable than seeing a ladybug in the front yard. “Yeah, Jesus was there.”

“Well, where was Jesus?”

Colton looked me right in the eye. “I was sitting in Jesus’ lap.”

If there are Stop buttons on conversations, that was one of them right there. Astonished into speechlessness, Sonja and I looked at each other and passed another silent telegram: *Okay, we really need to talk about this.*

We all piled out of the Expedition and trooped into Arby’s, emerging a few minutes later with a bag of grub. In between, Sonja and I exchanged whispers.

“Do you think he really saw angels?”

“And *Jesus*?!”

“I don’t know.”

“Was it a dream?”

“I don’t know—he seems so sure.”

Back in the SUV, Sonja passed out roast beef sandwiches and potato cakes, and I ventured another question.

“Colton, where were you when you saw Jesus?”

He looked at me as if to say, *Didn’t we just talk about this?*

“At the hospital. You know, when Dr. O’Holleran was working on me.”

“Well, Dr. O’Holleran worked on you a couple of times, remember?” I said. Colton had both an emergency appendectomy and then an abdominal clean-out in the hospital, and later we had taken Colton to have some keloid scarring removed, but that was at Dr. O’Holleran’s office. “Are you sure it was at the hospital?”

Colton nodded. “Yeah, at the hospital. When I was with Jesus, you were praying, and Mommy was talking on the phone.”

What?

That definitely meant he was talking about the hospital. But how in the world did he know where we had been?

“But you were in the operating room, Colton,” I said. “How could you know what we were doing?”

“‘Cause I could see you,” Colton said matter-of-factly. “I went up out of my body and I was looking down and I could see the doctor working on my body. And I saw you and Mommy. You were in a little room by yourself, praying; and Mommy was in a different room, and she was praying and talking on the phone.”

Colton’s words rocked me to my core. Sonja’s eyes were wider than ever, but she said nothing, just stared at me and absently bit into her sandwich.

That was all the information I could handle at that point. I started the engine, steered the Expedition back onto the street, and pointed us toward South Dakota. As I hit I-80, pasturelands unrolled on either side, dotted here and there with duck ponds that glinted in the moonlight. By then, it was very late, and soon everyone else was snoozing as planned.

As the road hummed underneath me, I marveled at the things I had just heard. Our little boy had said some pretty incredible stuff—and he had backed it up with credible information, things there was no way he could have known. We had not told him what we were doing while he was in surgery, under anesthesia, apparently unconscious.

Over and over, I kept asking myself, *How could he have known?* But by the time we rolled across the South Dakota state line, I had another question: *Could this be real?*

ONE

THE CRAWL-A-SEE-UM

The family trip when our nightmare began was supposed to be a celebration. In early March 2003, I was scheduled to travel to Greeley, Colorado, for a district board meeting of the Wesleyan church. Beginning the August before, our family had traveled a rocky road: seven months of back-to-back injury and illness that included a shattered leg, two surgeries, and a cancer scare, all of which combined to drain our bank account to the point where I could almost hear sucking sounds when the statements came in the mail. My small pastor's salary hadn't been affected, but our financial mainstay was the overhead garage door business we owned. Our medical trials had taken a heavy toll.

By February, though, we seemed to be on the other side of all that. Since I had to travel anyway, we decided to turn the board-meeting trip into a kind of marker in our family life—a time to have a little fun, revive our minds and spirits, and start moving forward again with fresh hope.

Sonja had heard of a neat place for kids to visit just outside Denver called the Butterfly Pavilion. Billed as an “invertebrate zoo,” the Butterfly Pavilion opened in 1995 as an educational project that would teach people about the wonders of insects as well as marine critters, the kinds that live in tide pools. These days, kids are greeted outside the zoo by a towering and colorful metal sculpture of a praying mantis. But back in 2003, the giant insect hadn't taken up his post yet, so the low brick building about fifteen minutes from downtown Denver didn't shout “Kid appeal!” on the outside. But inside, a world of wonders waited, especially for kids Colton's and Cassie's ages.

The first place we stopped was the “Crawl-A-See-Um,” a room filled with terrariums housing creepy-crawly critters from beetles to roaches to spiders. One exhibit, the Tarantula Tower, drew Cassie and Colton like a magnet. This stack of terrariums was, exactly as advertised, a tower of glassed-in habitats containing the kind of furry, thick-legged spiders that either fascinate you or give you the willies.

Cassie and Colton took turns climbing a three-step folding stool in order to get a look at the residents of the Tarantula Tower's upper stories. In one terrarium, a Mexican blonde tarantula squatted in a corner, its exoskeleton covered with what the exhibit placard described as hair in a “lovely” pale color. Another habitat contained a red-and-black tarantula native to India. One of the scarier-looking residents was a “skeleton tarantula,” so named because its black legs were segmented with white bands so that the spider looked a little like an Xray in reverse. We later heard that this particular skeleton tarantula was a bit of a rebel: once, she had somehow engineered a jailbreak, invaded the habitat next door, and eaten her neighbor for lunch.

As Colton hopped up on the footstool to see what the rogue tarantula looked like, he glanced back at me with a grin that warmed me. I could feel my neck muscles begin to unknot, and somewhere inside me a pressure valve released, the emotional equivalent of a long sigh. For the first time in months, I felt I could simply enjoy my family.

“Wow, look at that one!” Cassie said, pointing into one of the terrariums. A slightly gangly six-year-old, my daughter was as smart as a whip, a trait she got from her mom. Cassie was pointing to the exhibit sign, which read: “Goliath Birdeater . . . females can be over eleven inches long.”

The one in this tank was only about six inches long, but its body was as thick as Colton's wrist. He stared through the glass wide-eyed. I looked over and saw Sonja wrinkle her nose.

I guess one of the volunteer zookeepers saw her expression, too, because he quickly came to the birdeater's defense. "The Goliath is from South America," he said in a friendly, educational tone that said, *They're not as yucky as you think*. "Tarantulas from North and South America are very docile. You can even hold one right over there." He pointed to where another zookeeper was holding a smaller tarantula in his palm so that a group of kids could take a closer look.

Cassie darted across the room to see what all the fuss was about, with Sonja, Colton, and me bringing up the rear. In a corner of the room decorated to look like a bamboo hut, the keeper was displaying the undisputed star of the Crawl-A-Sec-Um, Rosie the Spider. A rose-haired tarantula from South America, Rosie was a furry arachnid with a plum-size body and legs six inches long, thick as pencils. But the best thing about Rosie from a kid's point of view was that if you were brave enough to hold her, even for a moment, the zookeeper would award you with a sticker.

Now, if you have little kids, you already know that there are times they'd rather have a good sticker than a handful of cash. And this sticker was special: white with a picture of a tarantula stamped in yellow, it read, "I held Rosie!"

This wasn't just any old sticker; this was a badge of courage!

Cassie bent low over the keeper's hand. Colton looked up at me, blue eyes wide. "Can I have a sticker, Daddy?"

"You have to hold Rosie to get a sticker, buddy."

At that age, Colton had this precious way of talking, part-serious, part-breathless, golly-gee wonder. He was a smart, funny little guy with a black-and-white way of looking at life. Something was either fun (LEGOs) or it wasn't (Barbies). He either liked food (steak) or hated it (green beans). There were good guys and bad guys, and his favorite toys were good-guy action figures. Superheroes were a big deal to Colton. He took his Spider-Man, Batman, and Buzz Lightyear action figures with him everywhere he went. That way, whether he was stuck in the backseat of the SUV, in a waiting room, or on the floor at the church, he could still create scenes in which the good guys saved the world. This usually involved swords, Colton's favorite weapon for banishing evil. At home, he could *be* the superhero. I'd often walk into the house and find Colton armed to the teeth, a toy sword tucked through each side of his belt and one in each hand: "I'm playing Zorro, Daddy! Wanna play?"

Now Colton turned his gaze to the spider in the keeper's hand, and it looked to me like he wished he had a sword right then, at least for moral support. I tried to imagine how huge the spider must look to a little guy who wasn't even four feet tall. Our son was all boy—a rough-and-tumble kid who had gotten up close and personal with plenty of ants and beetles and other crawling creatures. But none of those creepy-crawlies had been as big as his face and with hair nearly as long as his own.

Cassie straightened and smiled at Sonja. "I'll hold her, Mommy. Can I hold Rosie?"

"Okay, but you'll have to wait your turn," Sonja said.

Cassie got in line behind a couple of other kids. Colton's eyes never left Rosie as first a boy then a girl held the enormous spider and the zookeeper awarded the coveted stickers. In no time at all, Cassie's moment of truth arrived. Colton braced himself against my legs, close enough to see his sister, but trying to bolt at the same time, pushing back against my knees. Cassie held out her palm and we all watched as Rosie, an old hand with small, curious humans,

lifted one furry leg at a time and scurried across the bridge from the keeper's hand into Cassie's, then back into the keeper's.

"You did it!" the keeper said as Sonja and I clapped and cheered. "Good job!" Then the zookeeper stood, peeled a white-and-yellow sticker off a big roll, and gave it to Cassie.

This, of course, made it even worse for Colton, who had not only been upstaged by his sister but was now also the only stickerless Burpo kid. He gazed longingly at Cassie's prize, then back at Rosie, and I could see him trying to wrestle down his fear. Finally, he pursed his lips, dragged his gaze away from Rosie, and looked back up at me. "I don't want to hold her."

"Okay," I said.

"But can I have a sticker?"

"Nope, the only way to get one is to hold her. Cassie did it. You can do it if you want to. Do you want to try? Just for a second?"

Colton looked back at the spider, then at his sister, and I could see wheels turning behind his eyes: *Cassie did it. She didn't get bit.*

Then he shook his head firmly: No. "But I *still* want a *sticker!*" he insisted. At the time, Colton was two months shy of four years old—and he was very good at standing his ground.

"The only way you can get a sticker is if you hold Rosie," Sonja said. "Are you sure you don't want to hold her?"

Colton answered by grabbing Sonja's hand and trying to tug her away from the keeper. "No. I wanna to go see the starfish."

"Are you sure?" Sonja said.

With a vigorous nod, Colton marched toward the Crawl-A-See-Um door.