



Heaven Is for Real: The Movie

The first time I heard about turning *Heaven Is for Real* into a film was from a friend of mine here in Imperial. It was early 2011, and this friend had just been to see Dr. Timothy O'Holleran, Colton's surgeon in North Platte, for a medical appointment. During their visit, the discussion turned to Colton's story, and Dr. O'Holleran joked, "Well, when they make the movie, I want Brad Pitt to play me."

When my friend relayed this, I laughed. Then I did kind of a double take. "Movie?" I said. "We're not making a movie!"

By then, the book had turned our lives upside down. We were going places and doing things that, to be honest, if we had had any idea beforehand, we probably would've chickened out. On an average Sunday, our little church has about 100 souls in the pews. Now we were being asked to speak about Colton's story before thousands—to travel across the United States and even to faraway countries to share with countless other people who have questions about life after death, including those who have lost loved ones, especially children.

In a small church in a small town, not only do you preach, but you also do the weddings, the funerals, and the hospital visits. You also swing hammers and push mowers, mops, and brooms. That's all Sonja and I had ever known. Amidst the growing response to *Heaven Is for Real*, the book, the most important thing to us was to keep our commitments to our congregation. And yet, the requests continued tumbling in.

We spent a lot of time in prayer. "This is too big for us," many of our prayers went. "God, you've got the wrong people."

Trust me, God answered.

"Yeah, but . . ." we said.

If there's one thing we've learned, it's that God isn't much into yeah-buts. And when he invites us into a new work, he isn't always heavy on the details. For example, when he told Abraham to pack up and move, he didn't tell him where he was going or how he was going to get there. He just said, *Go*.

So we went.

Since hitting bookstore shelves in November 2010, *Heaven Is for Real* has been translated into more than thirty-five languages, and we have logged more than 50,000 miles by car (and more than four times that in the air), sharing the hope and promise of heaven. There seems to be something about an ordinary family with a child's life on the line, and the miracle that followed, that has translated to more people from more backgrounds than we could have possibly imagined. The book is now available in the native tongues of the Netherlands, Korea, South America, Portugal, Indonesia, Russia, Croatia, Finland, Vietnam, Turkey, France, Germany, and more. A publisher in India translated *Heaven Is for Real*

into Marathi, a language spoken by 60 million people, mostly Hindu.

We definitely weren't ready for the worldwide reaction to Colton's story and the demands that came with it, but thankfully God brought people alongside us to help. Our extended family handles the mail and phone calls. Pastor Phil Harris—he and his wife, Betty Lou, helped us care for Colton when he first became ill—became executive pastor at our church, Crossroads Wesleyan, and does a fantastic job helping me to shepherd our congregation. In fact, now that Phil is here, I wonder how I ever pastored without him.

Not long after Dr. O'Holleran's movie joke, we started getting calls from Hollywood. As you might imagine, when Los Angeles, California, met Imperial, Nebraska, it was like the old story of the country mouse and the city mouse: there was a steep learning curve on both sides. Once again, though, God brought the right people. Folks like producers Joe Roth and Bishop T. D. Jakes, DeVon Franklin of Sony/Columbia TriStar Pictures, and director/writer Randall Wallace, all highly respected professionals who recognized that no matter where we live or what we believe, we all face the same question: what happens when we die?

In 2012, when I read the *Heaven Is for Real* screenplay by Randall Wallace and Christopher Parker, I had two thoughts. First, Randall was not making a documentary, but he was making a film that's true to life. Second, the script spent quite a bit of time exploring some of my inner struggles as Colton's dad. According to Scripture, heaven is huge, magnificent, and beyond anyone's ability to describe it. And yet there was my

four-year-old trying to do just that. He said Jesus rode a rainbow horse, and I struggled with that. It sounded kind of cartoony, to be honest.

Then I thought, *Colton is a little kid with a little kid's vocabulary*. What would look like a “rainbow horse” to a little kid? A horse surrounded by an aura of refracted light, maybe? I didn't know. But I did know that after his near-death experience, Colton knew things that he couldn't possibly have known unless he was telling the truth about his experience. I finally concluded that Colton's memories of heaven were from a child's perspective, limited to a child's language and ability to comprehend. Astonishing but credible. Incomplete but truthful.

In July 2013, Sonja and I had the exciting opportunity to travel to Winnipeg, Canada, to visit the movie set and meet the cast and crew. While there we had dinner with Connor Corum—who plays the part of Colton—and his family. In August we went back with the rest of the family. Colton, who is now nearly fifteen, bent down and shook little Connor's hand. Later Colton told his friends, “It was like meeting Mini-Me!”

Connor really did remind us of Colton at that age. He was so unself-conscious that he was starring in a movie, a fact that most people would consider a big deal. When anyone asks what he thinks about heaven, Connor doesn't consult his script; he just answers, very simply, “That's where Jesus and the angels are.”

On the set we also met actor Greg Kinnear, who plays me in the film. Before our visit to Canada, we had already spent a couple of hours Skyping with Greg and his nine-year-old

daughter, who told us that *Heaven Is for Real* is one of her “favorite books!” I was really impressed with Greg’s questions and his desire to deliver a down-to-earth portrayal of a blue-collar pastor. I felt that if the goal was to cast someone who could be a believable me, then they got the right guy.

During the making of the movie, director/writer Randall Wallace was the person we spent the most time with as he worked through different aspects of the story. I had seen *Braveheart*—which earned Randall an Academy Award nomination for screenwriting—along with *Secretariat*, which he directed. It felt a little surreal to have a filmmaker of his caliber working on a story about our family. During one of our conversations, Randall shared that during the year leading up to actually shooting the film in Winnipeg, he had had a serious personal health challenge and also lost his mother to a long-term illness.

I shook my head and said, “Man, you really did your research before you started this project.”

He smiled and said, “Yes, I’ve been in training this whole year!”

Drawing in part on his own experience sitting at a loved one’s bedside with a scary prognosis, Randall has been able to translate our experience to the screen. I think it’s masterfully done.

While in Winnipeg we watched some scenes being filmed at a fire station and talked with the people who were playing firefighters, some of whom are firefighters in real life. We were amazed at the attention to detail we saw as those scenes were shot and reshot, again and again. Seeing the cast and

crew pour so much time, effort, and energy into just a couple of scenes gave us confidence in how much they cared about our story, as well as a new appreciation for how hard filmmakers work.

Our biggest hope for the movie was that Colton's story would be plainly told—that it would not be exaggerated or embellished. We feel that this movie accurately depicts Colton as a normal child in a normal family and subtly poses the question: *how would your family react if this happened to you?*

According to various polls, about eight in ten Americans believe in heaven, or at least believe in some kind of afterlife. Another question the movie places before filmgoers is, "Do you really believe what you say you do?" I think that's a huge, healthy question for all of us to ask. We often dodge God and questions of eternity until we face them at a loved one's funeral. We try to make ourselves busy so we don't have to think about it. But this movie puts the questions right up front: Do we really believe what we say we believe? And if the answer is yes, how does that change the way we live?

After seeing this movie, I think people are going to be reminded that it's okay to struggle. That the very nature of faith is to believe and yet not have all the answers. The unifying truth is that heaven is a real place—and that it gives us real hope.

This past year I participated in a fundraising banquet for a program that helped children. Before the banquet, I went into a room to meet some other program supporters and guests and was immediately greeted by a woman at the door.

"Hello," she said, extending her hand and sharing her

name. “I recently lost my six-year-old daughter in a tragic incident.”

My heart broke for her. I reached out to her and told her how sorry I was. She told me that the children’s book we wrote with Colton, *Heaven Is for Real for Kids*, had helped her and her husband explain to their two-year-old and four-year-old that their older sister had gone to heaven, and a little of what she might be experiencing there. She said the younger children wanted to read it every night, that it was giving them a way to cope with the loss of their sister, offering the hope of heaven and the assurance that they’d see her again.

I was blown away, humbled, and just about speechless.

Since the publication of *Heaven Is for Real*, Sonja and I meet people like this precious mom everywhere we go. People suffering incredible pain and incredible loss, who have received comfort from Colton’s story. We’ve been especially touched that so many fathers who have lost children have reached out to tell us how they’ve drawn comfort from the book. During my years in ministry, it has become very clear that a grieving mother will seek counseling or pick up the phone and pour out her heart to a friend, but men wrestle more privately with their grief. Somehow, Colton’s story has reached them and helped them move forward.

Heaven Is for Real also seemed to open up new dialogues about eternity. After our book appeared, publications from *Time* to *USA Today* to *Christianity Today* ran cover stories about heaven. Television news magazines also examined the topic of the afterlife. ABC’s Bob Woodruff—who himself had a near-death experience after being severely wounded as

an embedded journalist in Iraq—did a news special in which he interviewed people who had had similar experiences, including Pastor Don Piper, who wrote *90 Minutes in Heaven*.

But much of the conversation about heaven was taking place outside the spotlight. On a flight from Atlanta to Denver, I was sitting in an aisle seat next to a woman who kept stealing glances at me. It was mid-2011, after readers had really begun to respond to the book. I could tell by the woman's features that she was of Middle Eastern descent, although I didn't know from which country. Eventually her glances turned into kind of a stare.

Finally, she leaned over and said, "Did you write a book?"

I smiled. "Yes. Did you like it?"

She pointed at the bright yellow wristband I was wearing, imprinted with the book title, *Heaven Is for Real*. "That book? You wrote that book?"

"Yes, I did," I said.

Her face lit with delight. "I am Palestinian," she said, then explained that she had married an American, moved to the United States, and become a Christian. "I am coming back from visiting my family overseas. I took your book with me, to my family. They read it and afterwards, it was the first time we could sit down and have a conversation about God and nobody got in a fight!"

I listened in amazement and suddenly realized that a young child's story can go where few others can. Through front doors, to kitchen tables, into workplaces, and into cultures that might otherwise be closed to discussions about God and eternity. A young child is a pure witness. While he

may not notice the same things an adult would, or be able to describe them as completely, he doesn't try to explain *why* he saw something or why his account doesn't align with what the grown-ups think. He just says, "This is what I saw. I don't know about that . . . but this is what I saw."

A child doesn't have an agenda. A child isn't contaminated with adult-think. That's why the world has responded, we think. We've just tried to relay Colton's experience the best we could, then let people make their own decisions. I think what we shared in the book and now, the movie, is pretty open-ended. We just tell people, "This is what Colton heard from God; this is what he saw when he was in heaven."

Now people are free to ask themselves, *Okay, what am I going to do with that?*

Acts 4:20,
Todd Burpo
Imperial, Nebraska
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