



SEVENTEEN

Two Sisters

As the green days of summer gave way to a fiery fall, we talked with Colton about heaven every now and then. But one running conversation did emerge: when Colton saw Jesus in heaven, what did he look like? The reason for the frequency of this particular topic was that as a pastor, I wound up spending a lot of time at hospitals, in Christian bookstores, and at other churches—all places where there are lots of drawings and paintings of Christ. Often, Sonja and the kids were with me, so it became sort of a game. When we came across a picture of Jesus, we'd ask Colton, "What about this one? Is that what Jesus looks like?"

Invariably, Colton would peer for a moment at the picture and shake his tiny head. "No, the hair's not right," he would say. Or, "The clothes aren't right."

This would happen dozens of times over the next three years. Whether it was a poster in a Sunday school room, a rendering of Christ on a book cover, or a reprint of an old master's painting hanging on the wall of an old folks' home,

Colton's reaction was always the same: He was too young to articulate exactly what was wrong with every picture; he just knew they weren't right.

One evening in October, I was sitting at the kitchen table, working on a sermon. Sonja was around the corner in the living room, working on the business books, processing job tickets, and sorting through payables. Cassie played Barbie dolls at her feet. I heard Colton's footsteps padding up the hallway and caught a glimpse of him circling the couch, where he then planted himself directly in front of Sonja.

"Mommy, I have two sisters," Colton said.

I put down my pen. Sonja didn't. She kept on working.

Colton repeated himself. "Mommy, I have two sisters."

Sonja looked up from her paperwork and shook her head slightly. "No, you have your sister, Cassie, and . . . do you mean your cousin, Traci?"

"No." Colton clipped off the word adamantly. "I have two *sisters*. You had a baby die in your tummy, didn't you?"

At that moment, time stopped in the Burpo household, and Sonja's eyes grew wide. Just a few seconds before, Colton had been trying unsuccessfully to get his mom to listen to him. Now, even from the kitchen table, I could see that he had her undivided attention.

"Who told you I had a baby die in my tummy?" Sonja said, her tone serious.

"She did, Mommy. She said she died in your tummy."

Then Colton turned and started to walk away. He had said what he had to say and was ready to move on. But after the bomb he'd just dropped, Sonja was just getting started. Before

our son could get around the couch, Sonja's voice rang out in an all-hands-on-deck red alert. "*Colton Todd Burpo, you get back here right now!*"

Colton spun around and caught my eye. His face said, *What did I just do?*

I knew what my wife had to be feeling. Losing that baby was the most painful event of her life. We had explained it to Cassie; she was older. But we hadn't told Colton, judging the topic a bit beyond a four-year-old's capacity to understand. From the table, I watched quietly as emotions rioted across Sonja's face.

A bit nervously, Colton slunk back around the couch and faced his mom again, this time much more warily. "It's okay, Mommy," he said. "She's okay. God adopted her."

Sonja slid off the couch and knelt down in front of Colton so that she could look him in the eyes. "Don't you mean Jesus adopted her?" she said.

"No, Mommy. His Dad did!"

Sonja turned and looked at me. In that moment, she later told me, she was trying to stay calm, but she was overwhelmed. *Our baby . . . was—is!—a girl*, she thought.

Sonja focused on Colton, and I could hear the effort it took to steady her voice. "So what did she look like?"

"She looked a lot like Cassie," Colton said. "She is just a little bit smaller, and she has dark hair."

Sonja's dark hair.

As I watched, a blend of pain and joy played across my wife's face. Cassie and Colton have my blond hair. She had even jokingly complained to me before, "I carry these kids

for *nine months*, and they both come out looking like you!” Now there was a child who looked like her. A daughter. I saw the first hint of moisture glint in my wife’s eyes.

Now Colton went on without prompting. “In heaven, this little girl ran up to me, and she wouldn’t stop hugging me,” he said in a tone that clearly indicated he didn’t enjoy all this hugging from a *girl*.

“Maybe she was just happy that someone from her family was there,” Sonja offered. “Girls hug. When we’re happy, we hug.”

Colton didn’t seem convinced.

Sonja’s eyes lit up and she asked, “What was her name? What was the little girl’s name?”

Colton seemed to forget about all the yucky girl hugs for a moment. “She doesn’t have a name. You guys didn’t name her.”

How did he know that?

“You’re right, Colton,” Sonja said. “We didn’t even know she was a she.”

Then Colton said something that still rings in my ears: “Yeah, she said she just can’t wait for you and Daddy to get to heaven.”

From the kitchen table, I could see that Sonja was barely holding it together. She gave Colton a kiss and told him he could go play. And when he left the room, tears spilled over her cheeks.

“Our baby is okay,” she whispered. “Our baby is okay.”

From that moment on, the wound from one of the most painful episodes in our lives, losing a child we had wanted very much, began to heal. For me, losing the baby was a terrible

blow. But Sonja had told me that to her, the miscarriage not only seared her heart with grief, but it also felt like a personal failure.

“You do all the right things, eat all the right things, and you pray for the baby’s health, but still this tiny baby dies inside you,” she had once told me. “I feel guilty. I know in my mind that it wasn’t my fault, but there’s still this guilt.”

We had wanted to believe that our unborn child had gone to heaven. Even though the Bible is largely silent on this point, we had accepted it on faith. But now, we had an eyewitness: a daughter we had never met was waiting eagerly for us in eternity. From then on, Sonja and I began to joke about who would get to heaven first. There were several reasons she had always wanted to outlive me. For one thing, a pastor’s wife has to put up with being used as a sermon illustration a lot. If I died first, she’s always told me, she’d finally get to tell the congregation all *her* stories about *me*.

But now Sonja had a reason for wanting to reach heaven first. When she was pregnant with the child we lost, we had picked out a boy’s name—Colton—but we never could agree on a name for a little girl. I liked Kelsey, she liked Caitlin, and neither of us would budge.

But now that we know our little girl doesn’t have a name yet, we constantly tell each other, “I’m going to beat you to heaven and name her first!”