

Is “Heaven Is for Real”...for Real?

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STORY SUMMARY

After three-year-old Colton Burpo underwent emergency appendectomy surgery, he began telling his parents Todd & Sonja that he went to Heaven and came back during the surgery. They are skeptical at first, but according to them, he said things about Heaven and about family members that he couldn't or shouldn't have otherwise known.

- He tells them a number of things about what Heaven is like that a three-year-old who can't read shouldn't know.
- He said he met a girl who was his sister, his sister that Sonja had miscarried. Todd & Sonja said they had never told Colton Sonja had had a miscarriage.
- He said he saw his Grandpa Dennis, who had died before he was born. When Todd showed Colton pictures of Grandpa Dennis as an old man, Colton kept saying, “That's not him.” It was only when Todd showed Colton a picture of Grandpa Dennis as a younger man, a picture that Colton had never seen before, that Colton said, “That's him.”

POSITIVES

- Very positive portrayal of family, faith, church...even pastors!
- In the book, Colton attends a funeral that his dad officiates and asks, “Did the man have Jesus in his heart?” He then insists, “He *had* to have Jesus in his heart! He *had* to know Jesus or he can't get into heaven!” Todd then writes, “Colton was asking me whether the man who had died was a Christian who had accepted Christ as his Savior” (p. 57). The movie is much less clear on Scripture and the Gospel, to the point where it is almost entirely absent.
- Perhaps a good conversation starter with unsaved acquaintances.

BASIS BY WHICH TO EVALUATE THIS MOVIE/BOOK

- Feelings? Impressions? Good storytelling? Powerful moviemaking? Don't want to doubt a pastor and a three-year-old boy?
- Or...Acts 17:11?



BIBLICAL EVALUATION OF WHAT COLTON SAW IN HEAVEN

<i>What Colton Saw</i>	<i>What the Bible Says</i>
Jesus had the angels sing to him because he was scared (p. xvii-xix, p. 139).	Is. 6:1-4; Rev. 5:11-12; 7:11-12
The angels carry swords so they can keep Satan out of heaven (p. 132-133).	Gen. 3:24 Eph. 6:10-17 Rev. 1:16; 2:12, 16; 19:15, 21
The angel Gabriel sits at God's left hand (p. 101).	Luke 1:19
Everybody's got wings (p. 72; cf. p. 87) and has a light above their heads, like angels (p. 73). One of the angels who sang to him was Grandpa Dennis (p. xix)	Is. 6:2; Eze. 10:18-19; 1 Cor. 15:35-41
Jesus has a rainbow-colored horse (p. 63).	Rev. 19:11
The Holy Spirit is "kind of blue" (p. 103).	Matt. 3:16 (Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22; John 1:32); Acts 2:3; John 3:8
Jesus "shoots down power" to Daddy when he's preaching—it's the Holy Spirit (p. 125-126).	John 14:16; Acts 1:8; 2:1-4; Rom. 8:9; Eph. 1:13
He saw Mary, sometimes kneeling before Jesus and sometimes standing beside him (p. 152-153).	Rev. 7:9-12

BIBLICAL EVALUATION OF TRIPS TO HEAVEN

- Proverbs 30:4; John 3:13
- Yes, but what about those who had visions of Heaven—Micaiah (2 Chr. 18:18), Isaiah (Is. 6:1-13), Ezekiel (Eze. 1:1), Stephen (Acts 7:55), Paul (2 Cor. 12:1-6), and John (Rev. 1:1-2)?
 - "All of these were [God-revealed,] prophetic visions, not near-death experiences."¹
 - Also, these visions of Heaven differ markedly from contemporary trips to Heaven and back. These accounts, including *Heaven Is for Real*, seem to offer a very man-centered (or, in this case, child-centered) view of Heaven.
 - Not to mention that these accounts all differ from one another!²
- Note: This is not necessarily to deny near-death experiences, but simply to question trips to Heaven and back.

¹ Phil Johnson, "The Burpo-Malarkey Doctrine," *Grace to You*, October 18, 2012, <http://www.gty.org/blog/B121018>.

² MacArthur, *The Glory of Heaven: The Truth about Heaven, Angels, and Eternal Life*, 34.

PRIMARY ISSUE: ATTACK ON THE SUFFICIENCY OF SCRIPTURE

God had to take this child to heaven so he could come back and tell us about it so we would REALLY know it is real—it is the key to confidence in one’s faith and assurance in the afterlife.

- The authors claim this event strengthened their faith.
 - In the book, Todd says he now knows for sure God hears and answers prayer (p. 84).
I had been a Christian since childhood and a pastor for half my life, so I believed [God answers prayer] before. But now I knew it. How? As the nurses wheeled my son away screaming, “Daddy, Daddy, don’t let them take me!” . . . when I was angry at God because I couldn’t go to my son, hold him, and comfort him, God’s son was holding my son in his lap.
 - In the book, they say now they are bolder to talk about God (p. 153).
Another way Colton’s story has changed us is this: we are bolder. We live in a day and time when people question the existence of God. As a pastor, I was always comfortable talking about my faith, but now, in addition, I talk about what happened to my son. It’s the truth and I talk about it, no apologies.
 - At the end of the movie, Pastor Todd preaches a climactic “sermon” (he uses no Scripture) in which he asks, “Is Heaven for real?” He concludes by saying, “I believe,” while pointing to Colton. In other words, now he knows for sure because of what happened to Colton.
- This event strengthened the faith of others.
 - In the book, Colton’s story had strengthened their babysitter Ali’s faith (p. 130).
Ali had grown up in a Christian home but had entertained the same doubts as so many of us do: for example, how did we know any one religion is different from any other? But Colton’s story about his sister strengthened her Christian faith, Ali said. “Hearing him describe the girl’s face . . . it wasn’t something that a six-year-old boy could just make up,” she told us. “Now, whenever I am having doubts, I picture Colton’s face, tears running down his cheeks, as he told me how much he missed his sister.”
 - In the book, the words of Todd’s mother serve as the final statement of the book before the Epilogue (p. 150):
“Ever since this happened, I think more about what it might really be like in heaven. I accepted the idea of heaven before, but now I visualize it. Before, I’d heard, but now I know that someday I’m going to see.”
- This event gave them assurance that a loved one was indeed in Heaven.
 - In the book, Todd and his mother had always wondered if Todd’s grandpa was in Heaven, seeing as how he “went to church only once in a while.” They had believed Todd’s grandpa had raised his hand for salvation at a revival meeting to receive Christ, but now they knew for sure he was in Heaven because Colton saw him there (p. 85-92).
 - In the movie, Todd is desperate for assurance that his grandpa is in heaven and finds that assurance because Colton saw his grandpa in Heaven. “I think God might be trying to reach out to us through Colton.”
- This event allowed them to give assurance to others that their loved ones were indeed in Heaven.
 - In the book, Pastor Todd gives comfort to a woman who wonders if her unborn child is in heaven by referring to his son’s experience (p. 145-147). Now he is able to answer “some monumental questions.”
After the service that evening in January 2007, a young mother came up to me, her eyes brimming with tears. “I lost a baby,” she said. “She was stillborn. Would your son know if my baby’s in heaven?” The woman’s voice trembled, and I saw that she was physically shaking. I thought, Oh, Lord, who am I to answer this question? Colton had said there were many, many children in heaven. But it wasn’t like I could go and ask him if he’d seen this woman’s particular child. Still, I didn’t want to just leave her hanging in her grief either. Just then, a little boy of about six or seven came and stood beside the

woman, clinging to her skirt. And an answer came to me. “Ma’am, do you believe God loves me?” I said. She blinked away her tears. “Well . . . yes.” “Do you believe he loves you as much as he loves me?” “Yes. Yes, I do.” Then I nodded at her young son beside her. “Do you believe God loves your son here as much as he loves Colton?” She paused to process that question, then answered, “Yes, of course.” “Well, if you believe God loves you as much as he loves me, and you believe he loves your living son as much as he loves my living son, don’t you believe he loves your unborn child as much as he loves mine?” Suddenly, the woman stopped trembling and smiled. “I never thought about it that way.” I breathed a prayer of thanks to the Holy Spirit, who had clearly “shot down power,” giving me an answer for this grieving woman, because I can tell you right now, I’m not smart enough to have thought of it myself.

- In the movie, this story is changed in a significant way. In this version, Pastor Todd is giving comfort to a woman in his church whose 29-year-old son, a soldier, was killed in action. She asks, “Do you think my son went to Heaven?” He basically gives the same answer as above. Nothing about the Gospel: Jesus, the cross, faith in Christ.
- **A Key Passage: Luke 16:19-31**
 - The rich man was burdened for his family members. What did he ask Abraham to do in order to convince them of the truth about the afterlife?
 - What was Abraham’s response?
 - How is this relevant to *Heaven Is for Real*?

CONCLUSION

- 2 Cor. 4:18; Col. 3:1-2. We should think about Heaven.
- Deut. 29:29; Rev. 22:18-19.
- These kinds of books and movies are a modern form of the ancient heresy of Gnosticism.
- “The limits of our curiosity are thus established by the boundary of biblical revelation.”³
- “The current popularity of such books shows how hungry people are to hear about heaven....”⁴
Use any opportunities to point people to what the Bible says about Heaven!

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³ MacArthur, “Are Visits to Heaven for Real?”.

⁴ MacArthur, *The Glory of Heaven: The Truth about Heaven, Angels, and Eternal Life*, 16–17.