

Heaven Is for Real: A Little Boy's Astounding Story of His Trip to Heaven and Back Study Guide

**Heaven Is for Real: A Little Boy's Astounding Story of
His Trip to Heaven and Back by Todd Burpo**

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Plot Summary

Heaven is for Real: A Little Boy's Astounding Story of His Trip to Heaven and Back by Todd Burpo with Lynn Vincent is the story of a family who almost lost a son, but ended up getting a glimpse of Heaven.

The Burpo family has been having a difficult year. Todd, the father of the family, is the main wage-earner. He is a pastor, and he installs garage doors as a side business to supplement the church income. In one year he battled cancer and a severe leg break. After he recovered, he and his wife decided to turn a church conference into a fun, family vacation.

Right before Todd's wife, Sonja drives the kids to meet their father on vacation, their three-year-old son, Colton shows signs of illness. Fortunately, he quickly gets better so they are able to travel. Unfortunately, he becomes ill again on the trip, and things get worse quickly. The boy can't stop throwing up and he soon becomes listless.

The family rushes home to obtain medical care for the young boy, but he keeps getting worse. After seeing several doctors, they determine that his appendix has ruptured and toxins are seeping through his system. The boy is at death's door when his parents leave him when he is wheeled off for surgery.

After a few setbacks, Colton has a miraculous recovery. His little body is riddled with infection and his body doesn't functioning properly. He is ill to a point where they are going to send him to a children's hospital. A storm hinders their travels. The family is celebrating his life as they drive to visit relatives a few months after his recovery. He begins to make some strange statements, and the family eventually realizes that the boy had been given a glimpse of heaven while he was in surgery.

At first the parents can't believe it, but as months and years drag on, he continued telling them things about Jesus, God, and heaven that he couldn't possibly have known at his young age. He describes the heavenly thrones, the triune God, and angels. Colton says he met a sister he never knew he had. It was a child that Sonja had miscarried. He even knew all about Pop, Todd's grandfather, who had died long before the boy was born.

Todd is amazed at how the young boy's descriptions match up with passages from the Holy Bible that the child knew nothing about. At one point he even identifies a painting of Jesus that he says is accurate. It is a painting done by a girl who started having visions of heaven when she was four.

The family starts sharing Colton's story years after the event. They find that it helps people. By the end of the book, the boy is eleven years old. He would talk about heaven every once in a while, but hadn't been there since his experience as a three-year-old.



Prologue through Chapter 5

Prologue through Chapter 5 Summary and Analysis

Prologue - Angels at Arbys

The book opened with this prologue, in which the Burpo family is traveling to visit their nephew, Bennet, who was two months old. It was the weekend of the Fourth of July. Their last family trip had been a true disaster. One of their children had almost died during the trip they took in March.

Preparing for the trip was nerve-wracking as the desire to remain safe at home warred with the desire to see the precious new baby. The traveling won out, and the family decided to do the bulk of their traveling at night so the children would sleep most of the way. As they traveled through North Platte, they remembered how they spent a traumatic 15 days there, praying for Colton's survival. When they asked the boy if he remembered his hospital stay, he said yes he did. It was where the angels sang to him.

As they pulled into Arby's, the parents questioned the boy about his experience. He told them about the angels singing to him since he was scared. He also talked about seeing Jesus and sitting on Jesus' lap. He said this happened while his dad was praying and while his mother was on the phone. It was while he was in the operating room.

Chapter 1 - The Crawl-a-See-Um

In March of 2003, the family was planning a celebratory trip to Greeley, Colorado. Life had been tough since the previous August as they fought illness and injury. This took a huge toll on their finances. Todd had to go to a board meeting, and they decided to turn it into a family trip to celebrate the fact that they had beaten cancer and two surgeries.

They checked out the Tarantula Tower at the Butterfly Pavilion. Colton wasn't quite brave enough to hold Rosie the Spider, but Cassie was. Colton was obsessed with superheroes and often pretended to be one, but no superhero power was going to help him hold that spider initially. Cassie got the sticker Colton craved. He was three-years-old at the time. He left the area without holding Rosie.

Chapter 2 - Pastor Job

The family was still going through the exhibits at the Butterfly Pavilion. Todd thought back to his "old folk" baseball team that he played on with Sonja. He was sliding into third base the previous spring and had broken his leg in several spots. There, in the Butterfly Pavilion, he was finally able to walk without limping. Todd was a pastor who installed garage door openers on the side. His broken leg hindered his garage door work, and their family finances depleted rapidly.



In October, Todd woke to pain from a kidney stone. In November, he discovered he had breast cancer. Even though it didn't seem manly, he had to have a mastectomy. He was feeling full of self-pity and grumbled to God, then thought about what God's son had done for him. This humbled him, and Todd asked for forgiveness. God blessed him with a miracle. The tissue removed during the mastectomy was completely normal.

Chapter 3 - Colton Troughs it Out

Todd says that after the cast came off, he learned to walk and slowly regained his health. In February the board sets up a church denominational meeting in Greeley during the first week of March. Two days before they go to the Butterfly Pavilion, Colton has a stomachache.

Sonja has to work that day and Colton is staying with a good friend of the family's. The friend calls Sonja at work to tell her that her son has a fever and chills, but he is also sweating. It is decided that he should go to the emergency room. Todd is already in Greeley, and Sonja calls him to tell him that they might not make it out to join him. She leaves work early and takes Colton to the doctor, where he is diagnosed with a stomach flu that is making its way through town. That night his fever breaks. He seems to be feeling fine by Friday afternoon, so the trip is back on.

Back at the Butterfly Pavilion, time is running short. They ask Colton one more time and he decides he wants to hold Rosie. This time, he does so. Todd is feeling relaxed for the first time in months.

Chapter 4 - Smoke Signals

After leaving the Butterfly Pavilion, the family goes back to the hotel where the children swim. Then they all go out to dinner with another pastoral couple. Colton is unusually quiet and he complains that his tummy hurts. Kathy says she didn't feel well, either. This makes the parents think that they ate something that didn't agree with them.

Back in the hotel, Colton begins throwing up. He continues throwing up every thirty minutes throughout the night. Cassie begins throwing up, too. By the next morning, Cassie is getting better but Colton continues throwing up. Their new friend, Phil, suggests appendicitis.

The next day, Colton is still sick. They decide to take him to the hospital at home. He becomes much worse during the trip home. The doctor tells them that he doesn't have appendicitis, but he is concerned about the x-rays. There are three dark masses in his torso.

Chapter 5 - Shadow of Death

The masses are found on Monday, March 3. As he is getting rehydrated intravenously, Norma brings in his favorite action figure. Colton is too sick to react to it. Norma suggests taking Colton to Children's Hospital in Denver, but the family thinks things are under control and aren't sure if he would make the trip anyway.



By the second afternoon of Colton's hospital stay, Todd walks into his son's room and sees the shadow of death. As a pastor, he has seen it numerous times before as he stayed with families who were with a relative who was about to pass away. Usually he saw it in a hospice situation, and it was terrifying to see it in his not yet four-year-old son's room. The parents hold on to the hope that the doctor will have something to help them, but he doesn't.



Chapters 6-10

Chapters 6-10 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 6 - North Platte

On Wednesday, the parents tell the staff at the hospital that they are going to take Colton to the Great Plains Regional Medical Center in North Platte. They think about going to Children's, but feel that it was too far away and they want to stay close to their home base. They call ahead to the doctor to let them know that they are coming. Colton continues throwing up during the hour-and-a-half-long trip.

It is easy to blame themselves for not recognizing how severe the problem has been, but they know that they had to continue doing their best rather than dwelling on regrets. When they arrive, they discover that the doctor has gone out for lunch. Todd wants to scream, but knows that as a pastor he could lose his cool. When the doctor comes in, he orders a set of CT scans.

Chapter 7 - "I Think This is It"

Colton absolutely refuses to drink what it is he needs to take before he has the CT test. When he finally does take a sip, he throws it up. They try coaxing. They try reasoning. After an hour of trying to persuade the child to take the drink, the technician suggests that they should try the tests without it.

After the test, the technician leaves them in the hallway instead of taking them back to the waiting room. The parents know this was not a good sign. As they wait in the hallway, Todd reflects on the fact that Colton means everything to his wife because she considered him a healing gift after they had lost another baby. Todd can see his wife mentally struggling as she holds Colton in the hallway. Is God about to take away another one of their children? It certainly seems as if the boy is not going to make it.

Chapter 8 - Raging at God

A radiologist comes out and tells them that their son has a ruptured appendix and needs emergency surgery immediately. They take the child into the surgical prep room. Sonja kisses him and steps away as a nurse comes forward with the IV and needle. Colton screams, and Todd holds his son's head and shoulders, trying to soothe him. The parents leave with their son screaming for them not to leave.

The surgeon tells them that they have to go inside and clean Colton up after the burst appendix. They look for reassurance, but find none. Realizing that poison had been filling their son daily for five days, they understand how dire the situation is.

As his son is taken into surgery, Todd feels as if he is going to lose it, and he has to get away by himself. He goes into a small room, then closes the door behind him and



begins to rage at God. While he is in the room, he suddenly realizes that he might never see his son alive again. Extremely angry, he asks why he made it through his time of testing only to have his son taken away from him.

Chapter 9 - Minutes Like Glaciers

After fifteen minutes in the small room, Todd is ready to leave. It is the first time he has been alone during the ordeal. He wants to be strong for his wife. He finds her in the waiting room, calling family and friends on her cell phone. He uses his own phone to call the church secretary to ask everyone for prayers.

Todd knows that this is a time for great faith, but he feels his own faith fraying and desperately needs the support of others. Time drags during the surgery, which lasts for ninety minutes. A nurse comes in and calls for Colton's parents. She says that he is out of surgery but won't calm down. He is screaming for his father.

In the hospital room, Colton tells Todd that he had almost died. This shocks Todd because no one had told the child how serious his situation was. Todd encourages the child to get better and tells him that they will be with him along the way to healing.

Friends from their church show up to support them. The doctor shows them what he had done in surgery, and he teaches them how to treat the wound as it heals. Cleaning Colton is very painful to him and he screams.

Chapter 10 - Prayers of a Most Unusual Kind

Colton continues throwing up for another week after the surgery. The parents have to drain the pus out of his body twice a day. He begins to get better. On the day they are preparing to leave the hospital, the doctor stops them, telling them that there are still some problems. Colton's white cell count has spiked and they might have to operate again.

A CT scan shows that there is more infection in the abdomen. The surgeons perform another surgery, and the parents are concerned about the boy's weight. Colton is sent to the intensive care unit and put on a high nutrition diet. This gives the parents a chance to rest a little. They talk about everything they had been through.

Four days after the second surgery, Colton is in serious pain because he can't have a bowel movement. The doctors want to move him to a children's hospital, but they can't get there due to a freak spring snowstorm. Sonja is at her wit's end. Back at the church, over eighty people gather together to pray for the family. Within an hour, Colton starts getting better.

He uses the bathroom that evening, and by the next morning he is playing normally. When the doctor comes in the next morning, he is speechless. Over the next day and a half, nurses file in and out, staring at the miraculously-healed little boy.



Chapters 11-15

Chapters 11-15 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 11 - Colton Burpo, Collection Agent

After Colton is home from the hospital, the family is able to rest for a while. The bills start coming, and they realize they owed nearly \$23,000. With their finances depleted after Todd's issues, the number seems extremely large and impossible to pay. The medical bills on top of that are even higher. They agree to pay their tithe as a matter of priority no matter what. Colton also insists that they pay the doctor. He tells them Jesus used the doctor to fix him. This is a pretty big message from a child who isn't even four yet. Money begins to come in from donations with notes attached. The checks add up to the total they need to pay their bills, almost to the dollar.

Once when Colton is playing with a friend, he gets in trouble for treating his friend poorly. When Todd reprimands him, Colton tells Todd that Jesus had told him to be nice. Todd figures it was a message from a Sunday school lesson. A while later, Todd is talking with Sonja about a funeral service. Colton asks him what a funeral was, and Colton becomes very serious and asks if the man had Jesus in his heart. He is quite distraught and insists that the man had to have Jesus in his heart or he wouldn't get into heaven. At another funeral, Colton creates a ruckus, insisting that the deceased had to have Jesus in his heart. The family decides to keep him away from funerals for a while.

Chapter 12 - Eyewitness to Heaven

Four months after the surgery, Colton's parents start realizing something is unusual. On that Fourth of July weekend trip, the now four-year-old boy not only tells them that he had been out of his body while they were operating, but he tells them where his parents were during surgery. There was no way he could have known that. Even Sonja hadn't known where Todd was during the surgery. The vacation goes well, and they don't think much more about Colton's comments.

A week later, Todd is home alone with the kids. Cassie is spending the night with a friend and Colton is in the basement with Todd as Todd works on a sermon. Todd decides to ask Colton some questions about heaven. The boy tells him that Jesus told him about his cousin and he had met him. Jesus told him that his cousin baptized him, and Colton thought the man was nice. He couldn't remember his name, though. Colton also said that Jesus had a rainbow horse. The boy said there were lots of colors in heaven. Todd calls his wife to tell her what their son is telling him.

Todd is beginning to understand that his son might have actually been to heaven. He asks Colton what Jesus looked like. Colton says that Jesus had markers, brown hair, and hair on his face (a beard). He also said Jesus' eyes were "so pretty." He wore purple (and the boys made motions indicating a sash, although he didn't know what a



sash was). Other than the purple, his clothes were white. Colton said that Jesus was the only one in heaven with purple on. He also said there was a gold thing on Jesus' head. Todd asks where the markers were, and the boy points to his palms and feet.

Chapter 13 - Lights and Wings

Todd fills Sonja in on the conversations when she comes home from her trip. They decide to ask the boy open-ended questions to see if they can learn more about what had happened to him. A few days later, Todd asks Colton what he did in heaven. The boy says "homework." He says that Jesus was his teacher and there were a lot of kids in heaven. He says that everyone had wings, but his weren't very big. Everyone flew except for Jesus, who just went up and down like an elevator. The boy said that everyone had laid up with their heads.

These descriptions remind Todd of stories and passages he had read in the Bible. Colton says they had yellow from here to here, motioning from his left shoulder to his right hip. They were white from shoulder to toe. That was the angels. People wore different colors, he says and makes the sash motion again. Todd asks Colton how long he was gone, and the boy responds "Three minutes."

Chapter 14 - On Heaven Time

Todd tries to wrap his mind around that three-minute idea. He thinks about the way the Bible mentions that time is different in heaven. He also doesn't understand how Colton could have gone to heaven when he didn't die. According to the operative reports, the surgery went well. When he asks Colton about it, the child says that he did die, but just for a little bit. Todd thinks about the biblical instances where people see heaven without actually dying.

Colton asks Todd if he remembers how he was yelling for Todd when he came out of surgery. He said that he was yelling because Jesus told him to go back in answer to his father's prayer. This unnerves Todd because he remembers how he had been yelling at God and questioning his faithfulness, yet God responded with mercy.

Chapter 15 - Confession

Todd goes to a conference of pastors and feels the need to confess. He is bothered that he had raged at God only to have God bless him. He thanks everyone for their prayers and begins his confession. He tells them all his complete story, but he doesn't tell them that his son had been to heaven. He just says how he learned that it was okay to be real with God, and that God still heard prayers.



Chapters 16-20

Chapters 16-20 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 16 - Pop

In August, Todd takes Colton to work with him as he goes to install a garage door. The boy isn't very interested in the job, but he likes riding in the truck. During the trip, Colton asks his father if he had a grandfather named Pop. After asking this, he tells Todd that Pop was very nice. Todd is floored because Pop had died a quarter of a century before Colton's birth. The boy mentions that he knew his father was very close to Pop.

Todd thinks back to his childhood and to how close he was with his grandfather. He often visited him because his father had bipolar disorder. When he had the episodes, his mother would send the children to the grandparents. His grandfather was a well-loved farmer who only attended church occasionally. Todd's mother was always concerned that Pop might not have made it to heaven. Later, they discovered that he had been to a church service two days before he died. He became a Christian during that service.

Later, Todd calls his mother and tells her the story. She comes out to visit them. Colton tells her about meeting Pop, and she asks him if Jesus said anything about Todd becoming a pastor. The boy tells him that Jesus had told his father that he wanted him to become a pastor, and he did. This amazes Todd because it was exactly how it happened. He remembers when he was thirteen years old and felt almost a whisper telling him to become a pastor. He had gone home and told his mother about it.

Chapter 17 - Two Sisters

Summer slips into fall, and the family talks with Colton about heaven every once in a while. They ask what Jesus looked like, and they look at drawings and paintings of Christ. Colton tells them what was wrong with the images. In October, Colton tells his mother that he had two sisters. He tells her that she had a baby that died in her tummy. He says he talked with the sister.

Colton says that God adopted her, and he describes how she looked. The girl had hugged him and told him that she couldn't wait for the parents to get to heaven so she could meet them. This means a lot to Sonja and gives her something to look forward to. The parents now kid each other, saying they are going to get to heaven first so they can name their daughter first.

Chapter 18 - The Throne Room of God

Near Christmas in 2003, Todd is reading to Colton. He tells him a Bible story about Solomon and begins to wonder about God's throne. It's described several times in the Bible. He asks Colton if he had seen God's throne. The boy says he had and goes on to



tell his father how much God loves people. He also says that Jesus' chair was right next to his father's. Flabbergasted, Todd asks which side Jesus sat on and Colton shows him. It matches up with biblical descriptions. He says that Gabriel sat on the other side. This makes sense to Todd as he remembers the story of Zechariah when Gabriel told Zechariah that he stood in the presence of God.

When Todd asks Colton where he sat, the boy said they had a chair for him by God and the Holy Spirit. Colton adds upon questioning that the Holy Spirit was kind of blue. He says he met Pop when he was sitting by the Holy Spirit.

Chapter 19 - Jesus Really Loves the Children

In 2003 and 2004, Colton continues to talk about heaven, describing things about heaven as he does his normal daily activities. He constantly repeats the fact that Jesus loves the children. He does this so much that it changes their way of thinking about children, and the parents focus on children during their church activities, concentrating in children's ministries.

Colton also becomes obsessed with rainbows. One day Sonja sees an incredible rainbow and calls her son to see it. He nonchalantly confesses to praying for it the day before. He isn't surprised at all that it has shown up.

Chapter 20 - Dying and Living

In the spring of 2004, the family is celebrating the fact that Colton was still alive. It has been one year since his surgery. Now he is almost five years old. Todd asks Colton if he knows what Good Friday is about. The boy responds that Jesus had told him that He had died on the cross so that humans could go see his Dad.

The family have a problem with Colton because he keeps running off. Full of energy, he frequently doesn't know what he was doing. One day in April, the boy steps into a road at a snack stand, and his father sees an oncoming vehicle. He yells for his son to stop, and the boy does. The father shows some roadkill to teach the boy a lesson, but it doesn't faze the child. Instead, he grins and says that it would be good to die because it would mean that he would go back to heaven. His father doesn't know what to do but finally tells his son that this time he is going to heaven first.



Chapters 21-25

Chapters 21-25 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 21 The First Person You'll See

The family continues playing the "What does Jesus look like?" game throughout the summer. By now, they just start out asking what is wrong with each picture. The family is also excited about the county fair. Todd and his family pass out information about the garage door business at the fair. At one point, Todd has to leave the fair because one of his friends is dying. Colton is with him when he drives off to the nursing home. They are in the room with the dying man, and Colton goes up to him, holds his hand, and tells him that he doesn't have to worry because the first person he is going to see when he died is Jesus.

Chapter 21 - No One is Old in Heaven

Pop had died in 1975. After his death, Todd received Pop's rifle, his bowling ball, and his desk. He keeps a photograph of Pop in the top left drawer of the desk, and he looks at it every once in a while. In the picture, Pop was sixty-one. He shows the picture to Colton, but the boy doesn't seem to recognize it. He tells his father that nobody is old in Heaven and no one wears glasses.

Todd calls his mother and asks if she had any pictures of Pop when he was young. Several weeks later, an old photograph shows up in their mailbox. It is a picture of Pop and Todd's Grandma Ellen, his mother, and his uncle Bill. Todd had not mentioned to Colton that he was upset that his son didn't recognize Pop. Later, Todd shows Colton the picture. The boy asks where he had gotten a picture of Pop. He didn't recognize anyone else in the picture.

Chapter 23 - Power From Above

As Chapter 23 opened, the family is celebrating the birth of Colby Lawrence Burpo on October 4, 2004. Right from an early age, he is a clown. One evening, the mother and children are praying together as a family. Sonja suggests that they pray for their father and he preaches his sermons on Sunday mornings. Colton mentions that he had seen power shoot down to his father. The next day, Todd asks his son about it. Colton tells him the power was the Holy Spirit.

Chapter 24 - Ali's Moment

Now that the family has three children, the parents decide to hire a babysitter for their Monday night softball dates. They use an eighth-grader named Ali Titus. When they get home one evening, Sonja finds Ali crying at the sink. When she asked Ali what was wrong, Ali asked them about the baby they had miscarried. During the evening she had discovered Colton crying, and when she asked him what was wrong, he told her that he

missed his sister. He told Ali about meeting his sister in heaven. It made a big impact on Ali.

Chapter 25 - Swords of the Angels

In early 2006, the Burpo family rents the DVD, "The Lion The Witch, and the Wardrobe." The movie is about a group of children who were deported from London during World War II and sent to live with an eccentric professor. The youngest finds an enchanted wardrobe that leads to the magical kingdom.

Colton loves the film, and when it is over, Sonja teases him, saying that one thing that he probably didn't like about heaven was the fact that they didn't have swords. He contradicts her, exclaiming that there are definitely swords in heaven. Angels use them to keep Satan out of heaven. Todd asks if the boy had seen Satan, and he asks what Satan looked like. The boy completely stops talking, and in the future when they ask about Satan, he becomes obviously disconcerted to a point where the parents stopped asking about it.



Chapters 26-Epilogue

Chapters 26-Epilogue Summary and Analysis

Chapter 26 - The Coming War

In the beginning of Chapter 26, Todd and Colton are coming home from a trip to Walmart, which was an hour away. Colton begins talking about his father's future. The boy mentions that there is going to be a war, and Jesus, the Angels, and good people are going to fight against Satan and monsters and bad people. He says that he saw his father fighting, too. He mentions dragons, and it makes Todd think of a passage in Revelation. Colton isn't upset, and he reassures his father that Jesus wins the battle. Todd realizes Colton is describing the Battle of Armageddon.

Chapter 27 - Someday We'll See

On January 28, 2007, the family goes public with their story. Todd preaches a sermon about the doubting Thomas, and he talks about his own anger and lack of faith. He tells them a bit about the story, and says he would give more of the story that night in the service. That evening, the church is packed.

Later, they receive an e-mail telling them about a young girl named Akiane Kramarik from Idaho. She began to have "visions" of heaven when she was four years old, and she was an artist who painted what she saw in her visions. Her mother had been an atheist until she heard that her daughter was telling her about heaven.

Akiane had painted a portrait of Christ. In her description of the portrait, she was saying that his is just beautiful. This makes Todd think about Colton's reaction to Jesus and his description of Jesus' eyes.

Todd calls Colton over and shows him the picture, offering the standard line, "What's wrong with this one?" This time, the boy is silent. After a slight nudge, the seven-year-old boy turns to him and says, "Dad, that one's right."

The family begins to see the impact of Colton's story on people around them. They are able to use the story to comfort others and to witness. While they understand that it is a good thing for others, they question the pain that they had to go through. They are very grateful for the miracle, but still remember the fear and anguish they felt as their son was dying. They realize that it was a gift, however. The story encourages people to think about heaven and it gets them looking forward to it.

Epilogue

In the Epilogue, the author states that it had been a little over seven years since Colton almost died. People keep asking them about their story and wondering why they took so long to tell others about it. Todd explains that the events occurred over a period of time,



not immediately. Colton kept coming out with new things. When people suggest that they write a book, they were shocked because they weren't writers. They also weren't sure how it would affect Colton or how they would deal with publicity. People kept asking questions after the book was written. Colton confirmed that he saw pets and animals in heaven and he also saw Mary, the mother of Jesus.

People asked how the experience changed the Burpo family. Todd wrote that they learned the value of being vulnerable. They were also bolder when talking about God. Otherwise, life was pretty much the same in their small town. Cassie was heading off her high school, Colby was about to enter kindergarten, and Colton was about to enter sixth grade. His sister pointed out that he certainly wasn't a saint. When he was asked what he wanted people to get out of this book, Colton simply and directly reply, "I want them to know that heaven is for real."



Characters

Colton

Colton was four years old when the story began. He was born on May 19, 1999. His mother considered him a gift from God, since the child they were pregnant with before him had died. He loved to play with action figures and swords, yet was hesitant to jump in and try things immediately. He needed to build up courage first. This is shown when the family goes to a museum and he has a chance to hold a tarantula. He really wanted the sticker that showed he held the spider, but wasn't willing to actually do the deed at first. He came back later to do it, once he worked up the courage. Colton became very ill and after his surgeries, he talked about visiting heaven. He talked about it nonchalantly, as young children talk about events in their lives. Colton became very upset when people died, though, because he was adamant that they had to have Jesus in their hearts so they could go to heaven.

Todd Burpo

Todd Burpo is Colton's father. He was a pastor in a small town church. He also had a business installing garage doors. The man was dedicated to his family, and he had been through a tough year on his own before Colton's experience began. He had broken his leg in several places during a baseball game, and he also had to cope with breast cancer. Todd had decent biblical knowledge, and when his son began talking about God and heaven, Todd was frequently able to connect the descriptions of heaven with passages from the Holy Bible. Todd was not a holier-than-thou man. He was human and became angry with God when things went badly. He was overwhelmed by all that God did for their son, though. When he looked back at the family experiences, he saw how God worked in their lives and blessed them while giving them a new ministry.

Cassie

Cassie is Colton's sister. She was six years old when the story began.

Sonja Burpo

Sonja Burpo is Colton's mother.

Dr. Timothy O'Holleran

Dr. Timothy O'Holleran is the doctor who told them that Colton was in very bad shape.



Lawrence Barber

Lawrence Barber, also called Pop, was Todd's grandfather. Colton claimed to have seen him and talked with him in Heaven.

Jesus

Jesus is the being that Colton saw in Heaven. He was very kind and had very beautiful eyes, according to the child.

Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is a being that was sort of blue, according to Colton.

Norma Dannatt

Norma Dannatt is a family friend who was watching Colton when he had a stomachache before the family went on the March vacation.

Ali Titus

Ali Titus is the babysitter who was greatly influenced by Colton's story.

Colby

Colby is Colton's brother who was born after Colton healed.

Bennett

Bennett is the nephew the family was going to visit as the book opened.

Rosie the Spider

Rosie the Spider is the tarantula Colton summoned up bravery to hold.

Akiane Kramarik

Akiane Kramarik is a girl who began to get vision of heaven when she was four. She painted an image of Christ that Colton recognized.



Objects/Places

Heaven

This is the place Colton talked about when he said he saw Jesus.

Arby's

This was where the family stopped on a road trip, and Colton made comments that made them realize he really might have visited Heaven.

Sioux Falls, South Dakota

This is where the Burpo family was going to visit their new nephew as the book opened.

Imperial, Nebraska

This was the family's hometown when the story was written. It's a small farming town inside the western border of Nebraska.

Greeley, Colorado

This was where the family was going on a trip in March when disaster struck.

Butterfly Pavilion

This is where the family visited outside Denver. It's where Colton held a tarantula.

Great Plains Regional Medical Center

This is where Colton had his surgery and where he began his recovery.

Crossroads Wesleyan Church

This is the pastorate where Todd worked.

Appendix

This is what ruptured and put Colton at such high risk.



Images of Jesus

The family showed pictures of Jesus to Colton to see if they looked like the Jesus he saw. He said that Akiane Kramarik's painting was correct.

Bartlesville Wesleyan College

This is where Todd and Sonja met for the first time, on the quad.



Themes

Heaven

As seen in the title of the book, the main goal of this book is to get people to understand that heaven is for real. The author builds this case by telling the story of his son who nearly died. Months after his life-saving surgery, the child started referring to things that he saw in heaven. It was a difficult concept for anyone to grasp, even his parents. However, the more he talked about it, the more they realized that he was saying things that he couldn't possibly have known at his age and with his experiences. His parents began to realize the child truly had been to heaven and had seen Jesus.

The father, a pastor and the main author of this book, recognized the descriptions of heaven from various places in the Bible, some of them very obscure. He commented on the fact that there was no way his four-year-old son could have known about these passages. The boy talked about the beauty of heaven, he described the Holy Spirit, and he talked about meeting Jesus, God, a sister he had never known about, and a grandfather that had died long before he was born. He talked about angels, how they were dressed, and how they fought against Satan.

His time in heaven made such an impact on the boy that even when he was very young, he became very distressed when people were about to die. He was adamant that they needed to know Jesus so that they, too, could get to heaven. On the other hand, when someone was dying and Colton knew they had Jesus in their heart, he would reassure them and tell them everything would be all right. Jesus would be the first person they met when they died. He, himself, had no fear of dying because he knew it was just get him back to heaven.

Healing

This is also a story about injuries, sickness, and healing. Todd, the father in the book, had a very rough year as he recovered from a leg that was broken in several places during a baseball game and as he battled breast cancer. The cancer miraculously disappeared, and his leg healed so the family decided to celebrate by turning a conference he had to go to into a fun, family celebratory trip. It was during this trip that the boy became ill.

Sonja and Todd already mourned the child that they had lost due to a miscarriage. Watching Colton's health rapidly decline as he flirted with death was mentally agonizing. They prayed for healing, and their family and friends also prayed for healing. The boy made it through surgery, which was a miracle in itself. Then, he had some regression as he was trying to heal.

Once again, the church and family prayed. Their prayers were answered with a "yes" and the boy made a rapid, miraculous recovery. The doctor was amazed at the changes



in the boy, and nurses filtered in and out of the room to see the miraculous recovery for themselves.

While the physical healing was pivotal, there was also emotional and spiritual healing. Several times throughout the book, Todd mentioned how he raged at God and questioned His motives. Later, as he looked back at everything that had happened to the family, and as he sorted through his emotions, Todd recognized God's faithfulness. He also was reminded about all God had been through Himself when He had his own son on earth.

Faith

Faith was a key element in this book. The Burpo family remained faithful to God even when they dealt with the harsh blows life threw at them. This did not mean that they accepted everything passively. In fact, there were several times when Todd lashed out at God. But he never turned his back on God.

Even when the bills were piling up, and their income was severely curtailed, the family made sure that they honored God by paying off their tithe. Their faith was rewarded as money came pouring in from strangers, family, and friends, paying off their bills almost to the penny.

Many times throughout the book Todd listened to what his son was saying, and he was reminded about the importance of having faith like a child. The young boy accepted his experience with Jesus as a matter of fact. He kept talking about how much Jesus loves the little children. Colton also had no fear of death because he had faith in the fact that he would end up right back in heaven.

Todd was reminded of the importance of surrounding oneself in a community of others who shared the same faith. At times when he and his wife were too tired to pray, and they were feeling overwhelmed, the Christian community supported them and offered prayers on their behalf. At the end of the book, Todd was summing up their experiences. They were so traumatizing that he still wished they had never happened. However, he had faith that God was using the situation to reach out and help other people.

Style

Perspective

Todd Burpo wrote "Heaven is for Real: A Little Boy's Astounding Story of His Trip to Heaven and Back" with the New York Time best-selling author, Lynn Vincent. He was not a writer, but he had a story to tell about the amazing things that happened in his son's life. As a pastor, Todd knew a lot about the Holy Bible and about God and Jesus. When his son started talking about heaven, he knew the Bible stories and the biblical passages that coincided with his son's description of heaven. The writers added Holy Bible passages into the text and included references so readers could smoothly see what he referred to without breaking the flow of reading.

The book was written in first person from Todd's point of view. Because of this, the reader had a clear idea of the inner workings of the family. Instead of merely hearing an account of the trip to heaven, the reader could understand the pain and anguish the family went through as they lost their child slipping away from them. The reader could also experience the wonder and awe, and even a bit of doubt that was quickly overcome as Colton's experience unfolded before the parents.

Tone

The tone of this book is subjective. Heaven is for Real: A Little Boy's Astounding Story of His Trip to Heaven and Back by Todd Burpo with Lynn Vincent is a narration of the events that happened to the Burpo family. The topic was serious, but anecdotes, background information, and humor made it an inspiring read rather than a dry, dull depiction of events.

For example, instead of telling the reader that young Colton was on a trip when he became ill, the author told an anecdote of the boy in which he had to summon up his courage to hold a tarantula in order to get a sticker he craved. The reader could picture the boy and identify with him. Therefore, it was more interesting and heartbreaking to see his health decline so rapidly and realize the agony he was in during the trip.

The reader had the opportunity to connect with the author and his family, identifying with them as they struggled with health, religion, and finances. The tone of the book was casual, and the writing was in first person. Although it was based on true events, the author and his wife made a genuine effort to keep their own opinions and biases to themselves as they talked with their son and learned his story. The language in this book was very clear and readable. Any difficult words were used in context so they were easily understandable.

Structure

Heaven is for Real: A Little Boy's Astounding Story of His Trip to Heaven and Back by Todd Burpo with Lynn Vincent consists of a acknowledgements, a prologue, twenty-seven chapters, an epilogue, a timeline of events, notes, and a summary of the authors and their experiences. There were photos at the end of the book depicting family members and images referred to throughout the book such as Pop's picture and the painting of Jesus by Akiane.

The chapters ranged in length, but most were between four and seven pages. Each chapter was named, and the name highlighted a pivotal point in the chapter. The book started with a family trip that occurred after Colton had surgery. It soon went back in time to tell the story of the family from before the surgery. After that it drifted into events after the family trip mentioned at the beginning of the book, and closed with a summary of the family years later as the book was going into print.

The very beginning of the book highlights a series of quotes from people and groups who mention how the book inspired them. The end of the book contains images so the reader can clearly see and visualize the members of the family.



Quotes

"'Yes, Mommy, I remember,' he said. 'That's where the angels sang to me.'"
Prologue

"Feeling pretty smug in my martyrdom, I had just reached the top landing when a still, small voice arose in my heart: And what did my Son do for you?"
Chap. 2, p. 12

"Even during my conversations with others, my prayers ascended, a kind of mental background music that would've been in the foreground—the only ground—if only life didn't have an annoying way of rolling on.:
Chap. 5, p. 26

"By the second afternoon, I saw something that terrified me: the shadow of death."
Chap. 5, p. 26

"Now I was finally in a room where no one was looking at me, and I began raging at God."
Chap. 8, p. 39

"I was desperate for prayer, desperate that other believers would bang on the gates of heaven and beg for the life of our son."
Chap. 9, p. 41

"I stayed behind, sitting next to Colton's bed in one of those mesh-covered rockers, drinking in my son's aliveness."
Chap. 9, p. 43

"Some people freak out when their teenagers want to talk about sex. If you think that's tough, try talking to your preschooler about dying."
Chap. 9, p. 44

"When he saw Colton up, smiling and chipper, and playing with his action figures, the doctor was speechless. For a long moment, he actually just stood and stared."
Chap. 10, p. 51

"'Dad, Jesus used Dr. O'Holleran to help fix me,' he said, standing at the end of the counter with his hands on his hips. 'You need to pay him.'"
Chap. 11, p. 54

"It wasn't until four months after Colton's surgery, during our Fourth of July trip to meet our new nephew, that Sonja and I finally got a clue that something extraordinary had happened to our son."
Chap. 12, p. 60



"[W]hen 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."

Chap. 15, p. 84

"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."

Chap. 17, p. 96

"Well, Jesus told me he died on the cross so we could go see his Dad."

Chap. 18, p. 111

"After he left the room, Sonja and I talked about how interesting it was that Colton recognized Pop from a photo taken more than half a century before he was born—a photo he'd never seen before—but didn't recognize his great-grandma whom he had just seen a couple of months back."

Chap. 18, p. 123

Topics for Discussion

Why did the Burpo family feel that Colton really had been to heaven?

How did Colton's experience change the way they went about their church work?

How did Colton's experience change Todd and Sonja in their day-to-day existence?

How did Colton's experience influence his own life and his views on death?

What symptoms of illness did Colton have?

Why didn't the family realize that his health was so precarious?

What did Colton's experience with Rosie tell the reader about his character?