

By Russ Pankonin, The Imperial Republican

Do you remember a character by the name of Jerry Landers? He was the assistant manager of a grocery store in the movie "Oh, God!" Ring a bell? He was played by John Denver and George Burns played the role of God.

God chose Jerry to spread the word that He does exist. Jerry wasn't overly enthusiastic about the role that God had just laid upon him. Even Jerry doubted God was God until He performed some mini-miracles, like making it rain inside the car while the sun was shining outside.

When Jerry proclaimed that he'd seen God, his wife and family didn't believe him. He was ridiculed. His kids were made fun of too. It wasn't an easy burden to bear. But Jerry never lost the faith.

Does this story have a familiar ring to it? Does it resemble a story that's being played out in real life right here in Imperial, Nebraska?

I couldn't help but draw the similarities after seeing the movie, "Heaven is for Real," here in Imperial last week.

The movie reflects the story of a young Colton Burpo who made a journey to heaven at the age of 3, during a life-saving surgery.

Over time, Colton shared the things he saw during his brief trip to the heavenly realm. His father, Todd, a pastor at the Crossroads Wesleyan Church, struggled to make sense of what Colton had experienced. He was afraid to share these things for what people might think, both of him and his son.

How could it be true? How could Colton have actually seen these things? Even Colton's mom, Sonja, had trouble grasping the concept. When he told his mom that he'd seen his other sister in heaven, the one that died in his mommy's tummy before birth, Sonja's world was rocked as well. She had never told Colton that she and Todd had lost a baby before birth.

The Burpos began to share the story of their son's experience in heaven. Even members in Todd's church struggled with the reality of the stories Todd shared from the pulpit. Not only did they face doubters in their own church, they faced skepticism, ridicule and mistrust within the Imperial community.

Colton's story led to the book, "Heaven is for Real." It has sold more than 8 million copies and remains on the New York Times best seller list. Last week, the movie based on the book opened in Imperial and throughout the U.S. and was the second highest grossing movie last week.

Todd believes Colton and his family were chosen by God to go out and spread the message. Sounds to me that's how God challenged Jerry Landers in the movie "Oh, God!"

During the family's travels resulting from the book's allure, and now with the success of the movie, Todd said they've had the opportunity to reach thousands of people who needed to find or be reassured of the love of God for them. Now with the movie, Todd said millions of people will have the opportunity to be touched by God through the Burpos' message.

The notoriety brings a heavy cross to bear upon the Burpos. Their story has been sliced and diced on Internet blogs and postings. They must travel with security to insure their safety at speaking events. They still have to put up with ridicule and jealousy of their success in their own home town. To me, that's sad.

They've been accused of writing the book just to make money off their son's story. "I'm the

same person I was before," Todd told me this week. "I still live in the same house."

More importantly, Todd believes they were chosen for this role to spread God's word and love not only here and in Nebraska, but throughout the U.S. and the world. Todd feels that having to put up with the jibes, razzing, taunting and scorn is a small price to pay to help others see their way to Christ and the salvation that is eternal life in Heaven.

Like the character Jerry Landers, God has tasked not just the Burpos but me and all Christians to spread the Good News to others about God's love and redemption because Heaven is for real.