

'Heaven Is for Real' Director Faced Near-Devastating Spiritual Warfare Before Production

Award-winning producer Randall Wallace, famous for movies like *Braveheart* and *Secretariat*, saw his mother pass away in January 2013. His latest film project gave him peace about it.

"When I saw her die, I knew she was not dying," he told the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. "I found myself surprisingly comforted that my mother had not died at all, just her body had."

At the time, Wallace was making a movie based on the book *Heaven Is for Real*, in theaters April 16. The movie follows the story of Colton, a young boy who says he experienced heaven during a scary operation, then reveals the details to his awestruck parents.

On set, it was a story that gripped Wallace from the beginning. Off set, it helped him cope as he witnessed his mother's final days on earth. He faced the reality of life after death head-on.

Growing up, it was Wallace's mother who kept her son in church. Billy Graham books were scattered throughout their home, and Wallace remembers watching Graham preach on TV. He attended the greater Los Angeles Billy Graham crusade in 2004.

"I've probably heard Billy Graham speak more than any other pastor," he says.

The filmmaker majored in religion at Duke University in North Carolina, Graham's home state. Wallace later put himself

through a year of seminary at Duke Divinity School by teaching martial arts.

“Who you are comes out in everything you do,” he says.

Wallace, 64, was born in Jackson, Tenn. In church, he and his family sang hymns “at the top of [their] lungs.” Those hymns moved him to his very core.

“I’ve always wanted a movie to be something that would give the audience the chance to have that same kind of experience,” he says.

Wallace wears many hats, including screenwriter, producer and director. He’s worked on movies like *Man in the Iron Mask*, *We Were Soldiers* and *Pearl Harbor* with recurring themes such as loyalty, courage, love and sacrifice.

But *Heaven Is for Real* is a little different. In this movie, faith, prayer and—of course—heaven play a huge role. And Jesus Christ is actually a character.

The movie isn’t intended to “preach at” people, Wallace says, but to speak to people’s hearts.

Right after Wallace agreed to work on the film, he ended up in the hospital with a serious hand infection. The doctors planned to amputate the hand, but after several surgeries, amputation was thankfully avoided.

Todd Burpo, the Nebraska pastor who wrote *Heaven Is for Real* about his son’s experience, says he should have warned Wallace that others working on the movie had also experienced one struggle or another.

“But here we are,” Wallace says. “I believe the movie will give Christians a real encouragement and endorsements of their longings and their hopes for heaven. I also think it will give nonbelievers or people who are really struggling with belief a chance to feel the spirit of love and hope and the reality of

heaven.”

For his 2002 film *We Were Soldiers*, Wallace wrote a hymn called “Mansions of the Lord,” performed at President Ronald Reagan’s funeral two years later. The song is about the peace of heaven.

Wallace thought a lot about how to portray this peaceful grandeur in *Heaven Is for Real*. But when it comes to the faith in Christ required to get there, he says, it’s not that complicated.

He recalls a scene in the movie where Jesus offers His hand to Colton, but Colton has to reach up and take it. It struck a chord with Wallace.

“I think that’s the nature of faith,” he says. He thinks of pictures he’s seen of Jesus standing at a door, knocking, and says, “We are the ones that have to open the door.”

While working on his latest movie, Wallace also thought about what it means to have childlike faith.

“Part of what it means to be a child is to accept that you are a child, that you are not in charge,” he says. Or, to quote others, he says, “There is a God. It’s not me.”

Hymns have always had a big impact on Wallace, who recites the last two lines of a hymn called “My Shepherd Will Supply My Need.” The song ends with an observation about being in God’s presence: “No more a stranger, nor a guest, but like a child at home.”

“Heaven is not some strange place we go to,” he says. “Heaven is home.”