

THE YOUTH WORKER **BOOK**^{OF} **HOPE**

TIM BAKER

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WHEN THE VAN BREAKS DOWN

By Dave Ambrose

I WAS HEADED OFF FOR A WEEK OF SUMMER CAMP WITH A handful of students from our ministry—and this year I’d convinced Adam to come with us. Our church had been very intentional about reaching out to kids in our community who had no religious or spiritual background, and Adam completely fit the bill. I’m pretty sure the only reason he came to youth group in the first place was because our family-life center had an indoor gym, and Adam loved to hoop it up. But somewhere along the way Adam had become more and more interested in what was going on at youth group. And with support from a few volunteer youth workers who played ball with him every week, he’d also grown interested in what God was doing in his life. So when I asked Adam if he wanted to come to camp with us and play basketball all week, his only question was: “Where do I sign up?”

Now of course I’ve heard many friends in ministry tell horror stories about how they’d been stranded and left for dead on more than one occasion when the church van broke down. But our church had just purchased two brand-new 15-passenger vans. All I had to do was decide which one we’d take to camp.

As the day we were leaving approached, guess whose job it was to make sure the van was filled with gas and ready to go? You got it—yours truly. I remember stepping into the garage where the two new vans were parked and deciding we’d take the blue one. I hopped in the van to take it over to the gas station and fill it up so we’d be ready to go. Wow! I’d experienced the new-car smell before, but the new-van smell took things to a completely different level! It was incredible.

And the van had all the newest features, including a CD player with surround-sound speakers! (That was really something back in the day. Most church vans didn't even have a radio.) This was going to be a trip of a lifetime. What luxury. What ingenuity. I could hardly wait! After filling it with gas, I drove the van back to the church and tucked her snug as a bug back into the garage where she would wait for just a couple more days.

Finally the day arrived for us to leave for camp. I got to the church early, grabbed the keys to the blue van, and headed down to the garage to pull her out and get her warmed up. As I opened the garage door, I couldn't believe what I saw. The blue van was gone! I stood there for a minute trying to compose myself. Then I ran back into the church building, flung open the door to the office, and grabbed the sign-out log for the vans. I looked up our dates and, sure enough, I'd forgotten to sign out the blue van for our trip! That van was already several hundred miles north, carrying our senior citizens' group on their trip to the Land of Eternal Christmas or something like that.

My heart skipped a beat as I turned the page to see if the gray van was available. Thankfully it was. I quickly scribbled my name on the appropriate line and even backdated it so it would look like I'd reserved it weeks earlier. (I have no idea why I felt I had to do that.) Then I grabbed the keys and ran back down to the garage to pull the gray van around to the front of the church.

As soon as I started the van, I noticed the gas tank was completely empty. But I remember thinking how smart I'd been to get to the church so early. I made sure I still had the church credit card and ran to the gas station for another fill-up. By the time I got back, a few kids were already waiting outside with their parents. You could tell by their body language they were very excited about going to camp!

After the other kids arrived, we loaded our bags and camp gear into the back of the van before gathering for prayer. I remember listening as one of the parents prayed for our safety on the trip, but I had no idea how important that prayer would actually become. We hopped in the van, got everyone situated, and waved our goodbyes as we pulled out of the church parking lot.

For the first little while, everything went smoothly. I couldn't believe how great the trip was going. Kids were talking to each other (between rocking songs in surround sound), and we were all sharing what we were looking forward to most about camp. Adam was sitting in the front passenger seat next to me and was peppering me with questions about what to expect and what camp food tasted like. He had his basketball gear on, held his basketball in his hands, and said he was excited about teaching me the "finer points of the game."

After a few hours the kids agreed to turn the music down a bit because a few of them wanted to grab some shuteye before embarking on a

sleepless week of camp. I remember watching Adam doze off in the front passenger seat. He even started snoring. I tried to keep myself awake as we drove down the long, lonesome, two-lane highway leading up to camp. The sun was beginning to set, we were in the middle of nowhere, and the entire world seemed at peace. If we kept making such good time, we'd arrive at camp just in time for dinner.

All of a sudden, completely out of nowhere, something exploded on the front passenger side of the van. I had to use every ounce of energy to keep the van from flipping over into the ditch next to the highway. Everyone jolted awake. The explosion completely freaked out Adam, who woke up in a flash, smashed his hands against the front dashboard, and yelled "holy \$#%&!" (Which wasn't very funny at the moment with an entire van full of church kids, but looking back, it still cracks me up.)

Somehow I was able to maintain control of the van and slow it down enough to pull safely over to the side of the highway. We all jumped out to find the front tire on the passenger side had completely blown out. Once I saw the tire I understood why it had been so difficult to control the van at 55 mph, and I was even more thankful none of us was hurt. Darkness was quickly creeping in as we sat by the roadside in the middle of nowhere. I knew I had to get this thing

I REMEMBER LISTENING AS ONE OF THE PARENTS PRAYED FOR OUR SAFETY ON THE TRIP, BUT I HAD NO IDEA HOW IMPORTANT THAT PRAYER WOULD ACTUALLY BECOME.

changed fast! I asked the kids to help me unload our luggage so we could get to the spare tire and jack. I was hoping another driver would stop and offer to help, but there was no one on that road except us. (This was before cell phones, so we were really stranded.)

After we got the van completely unloaded, I spent the next few minutes trying to undo the cover on the storage space where the spare tire and jack were kept. It was unbelievable. What? Do you need a PhD to figure this thing out? Thankfully Adam was able to help me get it open so we could grab the spare tire.

But what I saw next made my stomach drop. The spare tire (in the brand new church van, mind you) was completely flat! Now what was I going to do? I was the only adult on the trip, responsible for 10 kids now standing by the side of the road next to our broken-down church van, and I didn't even have a spare tire. Why didn't they offer a class on handling these kinds of situations in Bible college? Greek wasn't going to help me much here.

It was at that moment when Adam (the unchurched kid, remember) looked at the rest of the group and said, "I think we'd better say a prayer. There's no way out of this without the Big Guy's help."

Now I know I was the pastor—and maybe I should've been embarrassed that I wasn't the one who suggested we pray. But Adam's words brought a huge smile to my face, and I turned to him and agreed, "That's a great idea Adam. Why don't you lead us in a word of prayer?"

Adam seemed uncertain. "I've never prayed out loud before."

I looked him right in the eye and responded, "That's all right, man. You just say what comes to your mind, and I know God will hear you."

I'll never forget Adam's prayer. I think it may be the reason we broke down in the first place. It's amazing what God will do to spend some time with us.

"God, we're in some deep \$#%& (clearly Adam liked that word), and there's no way out of this unless you send some help," he prayed. "And you better do it quick, because I gotta go to the bathroom, and it's a long walk to camp. Amen."

The entire group broke out laughing and high-fiving Adam, telling him how great his prayer was. It wasn't even five minutes later when we saw a pair of headlights coming down the road toward us. I asked the kids to stay put while I tried to wave this other vehicle down to see if we could get some help. It turned out to be another church van (much older and more beat up than ours, but theirs was still moving) filled with kids on their way to the same camp. After a few minutes of explanation (and a few laughs at my expense), the other youth worker agreed to go ahead to the camp and send back some help for us. I thanked him and we waited until help arrived. The camp sent another van to pick us up and we still got there in time for dinner. We left our brand-new van sitting by the side of the road until the next day, when I was able to go back and take care of it with some help from the camp staff.

I'm happy to say we had a great time at camp that week, and Adam began following Jesus in a completely fresh way.

WRONG TURNS AND MISSED EXITS

Obviously there's nothing you can do to ensure you'll never break down on a long trip with a group of kids. But looking back, it's clear I made a few mistakes:

1. I forgot to sign out the van and do a pre-trip inspection.

Even though I thought I didn't have anything to worry about because our church had two brand-new vans, I shouldn't have taken anything for granted. There's a lot to remember for any trip you take! When you're taking kids along with you, no matter what you're transporting them in, I've found it's a great idea to have a written checklist to review before you even leave home. I was very fortunate our church's other van was still in the garage. What would I have done if I'd arrived that morning and both vans were gone? It would've been a nightmare, and it would've cost me a certain amount of credibility with both kids and parents.

2. I didn't have an emergency plan mapped out.

Another mistake I made was failing to have an emergency plan in place if something were to go wrong. No matter what kind of vehicles you drive, no matter how great your ministry ideas are, there's always a risk of something unexpected happening. If I'd given it a little more thought, I'd have realized I needed another youth leader with me, maybe even following me in a different vehicle in case something like this happened. But I never took the time to think it all through in advance.

WHEN YOU OPEN
YOUR MINISTRY
AND ACTUALLY
INVITE OTHER
PEOPLE TO HELP,
YOU BUILD A
BROADER BASE
OF OWNERSHIP.
YOU GIVE OTHERS
OPPORTUNITIES
TO USE THEIR GIFTS
TO GLORIFY GOD.
AND YOU GET THE
CHANCE TO SEE
GOD AT WORK
THROUGH ALL THE
DIFFERENT PARTS
OF HIS BODY—
THE CHURCH.

3. I tried to do it all myself.

I'm sure you're familiar with the Old Testament story about Moses trying to do everything himself and acting as ultimate judge and jury for the entire Jewish nation. I've taught this story to my own youth groups many times. So why are there still so many times when I try to do it all myself—in my life and in my ministry? Am I too proud to ask for help? Maybe I'm too insecure? Do I think asking someone else to come alongside and share the load is a sign of weakness? It took good ol' Jethro to straighten Moses out and get him started down the right path toward delegation. What's it going to take in my life?

When you do everything yourself, you may feel like things get done a little more quickly. You may think it's the best way to ensure things get done the way you want them done. But you also

miss out on quite a bit. When you open your ministry and actually invite other people to help, you build a broader base of ownership. You give others opportunities to use their gifts to glorify God. And you get the chance to see God at work through all the different parts of his body—the church. And that's quite a sight to see!

4. I didn't really trust God would show up.

God is seldom early, but he's never late. Why do I have such a difficult time trusting God with all the intimate details of my life? As we stood by the side of the road next to our broken-down van that day, I honestly had no idea what to do next. I didn't know where to turn. But Adam did. He knew we needed to pray and ask God to help us. He knew this situation was giving us the opportunity to learn to trust God and see what he was going to do. Lord, help that become *my* first instinct as well.

FINDING HOPE

No matter how well you plan things out, you can never assure everything will go smoothly. Bad things happen to every single one of us. As a youth worker you've probably already experienced at least one situation in which you did everything possible to prepare, yet things still went horribly wrong. (If not, don't worry—your time is coming!) We can't control everything, and we can't prevent bad things from occurring in our lives. But I'm a firm believer everything happens for a reason because I believe God is sovereign. He's interested in, and in charge of every detail of our lives, and he wants to be involved—if we'll only invite him to be. God will never force himself on us. We have to ask him to get involved. We have to invite him into every little crease and crevice of our life.

And when we do ask God to get involved, we'll often find that the help God offers comes through the body of Christ—through other Christians seeking to follow God's leading. That's not always easy for us to accept. If I'm really honest with myself, I have to admit that when the other youth pastor and his team came down the road and rescued us, it was difficult for me. When the camp staff helped me work it all out and drove back with me the next day so we could get our van back up and running, it was difficult for me. I was afraid of what people were thinking about me. I was afraid of being tagged as a failure. I was embarrassed I needed to ask for help. I guess I was just feeling insecure about who I was and how capable I was of doing the

job I was called to do. The truth is I still am at times. I need to learn to be okay when other people come alongside to help. I need to see these times as opportunities for God to minister to me through others. Instead of kicking back against it, I want to learn to open myself to this and watch God work.

By the way, we got home from camp safe and sound, and the entire experience was an unforgettable adventure! The experience has stuck with me through the years because it taught me a lot about God's protection and his intervention in my life. And it was also a wonderful reminder of the ways God is working in the lives of kids—even kids like Adam who we might think are just along for the ride.

We all seemed to meet God in our own way that day by the side of the highway. I'll never forget the way God showed up as we stood there in the middle of nowhere next to our broken-down van. How are you depending on God to show up in your life and ministry today?