

ALONGSIDE • loving teenagers with the gospel • drew hill

ALONGSIDE

“This book is a gift. I commend it to parents, pastors, lay leaders, and most especially, our fearless heroes: those walking alongside teenagers in youth ministry.”

**Foley Beach**, Archbishop and Primate, The Anglican Church in North America

“*Alongside* is a modern-day primer for parents and youth workers. A must-read for those who are serious about meeting teenagers where they are.”

**Gail Ebersole**, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, Vice President, Eastern US

“*Alongside* is a great read for any parent or student leader who wants to effectively engage students with the gospel.”

**J. D. Greear**, Pastor of The Summit Church, Durham, NC

“This book will equip anyone to impact the next generation with the heart of God.”

**Clint Gresham**, Seattle Seahawks Super Bowl XLVIII Champion; best-selling author of *Becoming*; international speaker

“*Alongside* takes you on an amazing journey through the struggles and trials of being a teenager . . . A great read!”

**Dave Alpern**, President, Joe Gibbs Racing

“*Alongside* helps transform the principles of the Gospel into very practical ways to inspire the tender hearts of young people.”

**Joe White**, President of Kanakuk Kamps

“*Alongside* is an essential read for anyone who loves teenagers and seeks to reach their hearts with the gospel.”

**Matthew Smith**, singer-songwriter, Indelible Grace

“This is not just a book about relating to youth culture. It is a road map for living life well, at any age and in any community. Read it. Do what it says. The rewards are generous.”

**Allen Levi**, singer-songwriter; author of *The Last Sweet Mile*

“*Alongside* is a great resource to have on your bookshelf through the seasons of life and ministry.”

**Cesar Castillejos**, Pastor; father; youth ministry veteran

“This book was written in the trenches, years and years of relating to students and parents. . . . It is authentic, relevant, and helpful. A *must* read for anyone leading teenagers!”

**Bryson Vogeltanz**, Location Pastor, Passion City Church, Atlanta, GA

“Drew Hill not only captures your heart with the power of the gospel, but this book is also full of captivating stories and illustrations. *Alongside* is an excellent resource for the church.”

**Matthew Z. Capps**, Senior Pastor, Fairview Baptist Church, Apex NC

“A must-read book, *Alongside* is refreshingly honest and filled with life-changing, relationship-enriching insights and inspiration.”

**Fil Anderson**, Author of *Running on Empty*

“A must-read for anyone involved in youth ministry.”

**Jim Branch**, Youth ministry veteran; author of *The Blue Book*

“Drew Hill’s passion for Jesus and teenagers is contagious! *Alongside* is an excellent read. Short, fun to read chapters, packed full of relevant stories and practical ministry ideas.”

**Bradley J. Widstrom**, Associate Professor, Chair Youth and Family Studies, Denver Seminary, Littleton, CO

“Drew starts with Scripture, shares stories about teenagers he’s known, and offers practical tools for living out 1 Thessalonians 2:8 with the teenagers in your life.”

**Julie Clapp**, Mission Director of WyldLife, Young Life

“Drew invites parents and youth workers to be a forgiving, redeeming, gospel-centric presence in teenagers’ lives and to drink deeply from the power of prayer.”

**Jodi Chung**, Youth Pastor, West Houston Chinese Church, Houston, TX

“I can’t wait to share this gem of a book with family, friends and fellow youth workers.”

**Rich Van Pelt**, Compassion International, Senior Director for Ministry Relationships

“Hill is one of the most qualified people to write this diamond of a book. . . . This raw, real, and relevant work will help all who read it find their way, and invest in the next generation.”

**Pete Hardesty**, Young Life College Divisional Coordinator; author of *Adulthood 101*

“Whether you’re a parent, a church youth minister or volunteer, a teacher, or in any way involved with teenagers, you’ll be challenged, inspired, and encouraged.”

**Ty Saltzgeber**, Author of *My First 30 Quiet Times*

“*Alongside* captures the essence of what Drew’s life has taught me: God designed his message to live in people. The Word becoming flesh was not an isolated event, but a precedent for all of us.”

**Zak Ellison**, Young Life Area Director, Merced, CA

I truly believe this book should be in every household. It will be practically helpful for parents, teachers, coaches and all those in youth ministry.”

**Odysseus Wallace**, Young Life Area Director, Chattanooga, TN

“As someone in family ministry, *Alongside* is the best of both worlds—a helpful tool that will both build up our volunteers and also serve as an encouragement for parents.”

**Paul Mannino**, Family Pastor, Grace Church, Kutztown, PA

“As an educator of seventeen years, *Alongside* has allowed me to see my students in a more compassionate and loving way!”

**Joey Menendez**, High School Principal, San Jose, Costa Rica

“*Alongside* helps us mouth words of prayer for young people and invites us into their world through vivid snapshots of unfiltered real-life stories.”

**Sean McGeever**, Professor of Theology at Grand Canyon University, Phoenix, AZ; author of YLHelp.com

**ALONGSIDE**  
LOVING TEENAGERS WITH THE  
GOSPEL

Drew Hill



New Growth Press, Greensboro, NC 27404  
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Many of the names of actual people in this book have been changed, out of respect.

Cover Design: Faceout Books, [faceoutstudio.com](http://faceoutstudio.com)

ISBN 978-1-945270-89-5 (Print)

ISBN 978-1-945270-90-1 (eBook)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data on file

Printed in The United States of America

25 24 23 22 21 20 19 18 1 2 3 4 5

To Natalie: You show me Jesus.

To Honey, Hutch, and Macy Heart: The treasure is you, you see.

To Mom and Dad: Thank you for loving me with the gospel.

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# INTRODUCTION

Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well.

—1 Thessalonians 2:8

LUKE PALMER ran away.

On the surface, it seemed as if everything was normal, but underneath Luke's typical smile was a volcano of stress. A few days before Luke went missing, his teacher called Luke's parents, Eric and Sheila, to arrange a meeting. The teacher wanted to discuss Luke's academic performance.

In his first semester of high school, Luke hadn't been honest with his parents about his grades. It was the day of the dreaded meeting, and although he didn't have his driver's license, the fifteen-year-old knew where his dad's keys were. He wasn't about to wait around for his parents to return home after their meeting with his teacher. As Eric and Sheila pulled down their driveway, driving Sheila's car, they noticed Eric's car was missing. Luke didn't have a phone. There was no way for his parents to know where he was. His dad started calling Luke's friends, who claimed to know nothing, other than the fact that Luke had mentioned the possibility of running away.

Upset and anxious, Eric drove from North Carolina to Virginia searching for his son. He stopped at almost every gas station and rest stop along the highway. Eventually, he returned home empty-handed, begging God for his son's safe return.

In desperation, Eric called the high school principal. The principal talked to some of Luke's friends, who thought he might be heading to New York City, but no one knew for sure. One of Eric's coworkers, David Thompson, suggested they make the road trip to NYC and at least be there in case Luke called. At one thirty on Friday afternoon, Eric and David started driving. They made it to Manhattan by midnight and started the search in Times Square.

In the sea of people, Eric felt no hope of finding his son. David and Eric decided to split up. David walked in one store, then another. No Luke. Then, he walked into the Times Square McDonald's and broke down in tears.

David called Eric. "I'm with Luke."

Like a scene out of a movie, Eric dashed in front of taxis to get across the street. Moments later, he was holding his lost son. This story may seem unbelievable, but it's true.

\*\*\*\*\*

Twenty-five years before David Thompson had driven to New York with Eric Palmer to chase down Luke, he had pursued a fifteen-year-old in his church's youth group named Drew Hill. Yes, me.

While writing this book, my wife Natalie and I started listing names of people who have pursued us—people who have walked alongside us and demonstrated the gospel, with their lips and their lives. Along with David Thompson, it was quite a list of friends, family members, pastors, teachers, Young Life leaders, mentors, coaches, and bosses. Since the time I learned to run, they made me believe I was worth the chase.

I'm grateful for the countless people who have shown me Jesus, but that doesn't take away my longing to be pursued. I'm almost forty years old and still wrestle with the lies of loneliness that tell me I'm not worth loving.

Our teenage friends and children have the very same longings. They hunger for pursuit. They are desperate to be loved. They crave to be chased.

The adolescent years are ones of great confusion; you might remember your own. Teenagers are trying to figure out who they are, where they belong, and if they matter. They're searching for identity, meaning, and happiness. As Victor Hugo once wrote, "Life's greatest happiness is to be convinced we are loved." Is there anything more convincing than the gospel?

The gospel is the good news that even though we're far worse than we ever imagined, we're far more loved than we could ever dream.<sup>1</sup> God created us in his image, and despite our sin and rebellion, he himself put on skin, came alongside us, and brought his kingdom to earth. In his great love, Jesus took on our human nature, lived a perfect life, bore the cross we deserved, defeated death, and brought us into the presence of God forever.

The gospel is the ultimate answer to the questions and longings of our teenage friends.

***“Who am I?” “Where do I belong?” “Do I even matter?”***

You are a masterpiece, created in the very image of God. Even though you feel as if you don't deserve his love, through Jesus and his sacrifice on the cross, you are forgiven. You are made righteous and accepted by a holy God. You are so valuable that God himself gave his life for you. You now have the right to be called a son or daughter of God. And as a prince or princess of the King of Kings, you actually get to be an ambassador of God on this earth. You are the light of the world. God has unbelievable plans, and he's invited you into his story. And it's the greatest love story ever told.

Adolescence is such a pivotal time of development. Teenagers are searching for answers to these questions of identity, belonging, and purpose. They are desperately longing for intimacy and acceptance. Every other place they look will only leave them with more brokenness and confusion. Jesus is their only hope.

So, how do we actually share the incredibly good news of Jesus with our adolescent children and teenage friends? How do we lead them toward truth and intimacy with God? How do we love teenagers with the gospel?

In 1 Thessalonians 2:7–8, the apostle Paul gives a compelling example: “Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, so we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well.”

**Sharing the gospel is far more than sharing information. It's opening up our very lives, giving away our very souls. It's unveiling our longings, our fears, our joys. It's inviting others into our mess and being willing to step into theirs.**

Paul paints a picture of what the gospel does to the heart. He describes the tenderness of a nursing mother with her child. The gospel leads us into a deep place of holy intimacy where our response is to delight in giving away our very lives.

If you're a parent, youth pastor, Young Life leader, grandparent, coach, teacher, small group leader, or simply anyone who cares about teenagers: This was written for you.

While I may have never met you, I've prayed for *you* while I've written. I have prayed that the pages that follow will stir in you an even greater affection for your children and your middle and high school friends. I have begged God that, somehow, he would use these imperfect sentences to grant you insight

into how you can actually walk alongside a teenager. I've asked the Lord that these words might give you a framework and passion for communicating the gospel of grace. And most of all, I've prayed that this book may be a reminder that we have a God who pursues, delights in, and walks alongside us.

Delighted to share,

A handwritten signature in black ink. The letter 'D' is large and stylized, with a vertical line through its center. To the right of the 'D', the letters 'REW' are written in a smaller, blocky, sans-serif font.

## PART ONE: THE RUNAWAYS

### The Story of Teenagers: Those in Need of a Rescue

Teenagers are awesome—a mix of childlike spirits and adultlike ambitions. Knowing them is a gift, but loving them is often challenging. One of the biggest challenges we face is simply understanding and remembering what it's like to be a teenager. That time of transition can feel a lot like leaping from the cliff of childhood, grasping for the mountain of adulthood, and finding yourself stuck in midair. Adolescents need wise, caring adults who are committed to reaching into their worlds, although it often requires taking a leap of faith ourselves.

As a kid, I remember being so frustrated by the *Magic Eye* books my friends brought to school. They claimed if I just stared at the two-dimensional patterns and “went cross-eyed,” I could see a three-dimensional image pop out of the picture on the page. It seemed as if everyone else could see it, but no matter how hard I tried, it just looked like a jumbled pattern of different shapes and colors. Then, one day, it just happened. My friends told me to “relax my eyes and get lost in the picture.” The next thing I knew, I was screaming like it was Christmas morning. I could finally see the three-dimensional image!

Sometimes it feels as if we try so hard to understand teenagers, only to be slapped in the face with frustration, confusion, and rejection. In this first section, my hope is that you get lost in the world of adolescence—and that somehow, through the grace of God, he would open our eyes to better understand the teenagers in our lives.

## CHAPTER 1 || BROKEN HEART

Give me your heart and let your eyes delight in my ways.

—Proverbs 23:26

THERE'S THIS one-act play I've seen a half-dozen times.<sup>1</sup> It opens with a little girl sitting center stage, smiling and holding a big juicy orange that represents her heart.

The narrator begins, “Meet Sally Smith. She is an average, all-American five-year-old girl. Her favorite pastimes are helping Mom in the kitchen, playing with Play-Doh, visiting Grandma, and going to preschool. A fun and exciting life—lots of love and security. But then, one day, things changed.”

Sally is told by her mother that her parents are getting divorced. Sally cries, and her mother tries to convince her that everything's going to be OK. Her mother says Sally can visit her dad one weekend each month, and he might even take her to the zoo. Sally, left alone in her room, begins asking hard questions: “Daddy, don't you love me anymore? Did I do something wrong? And Mommy—Mommy, you must not love me either. Otherwise you wouldn't send Daddy away!”

With soft music playing in the background, Sally tears a piece from the orange and throws it in the distance. It feels as if a piece of her heart has been torn apart. In the next scene, a character portraying the devil introduces himself to Sally.

“Sally, I know you don't know me, but I'm your friend. And it sure sounds as if something terrible has happened to you. But don't worry; I've got just what you need. I have some *toys* just for you.”

The first toy he gives her is called the *twig of bitterness*. He instructs her to use it to protect her heart. He promises that the little twig will prick anyone who dares to come near. He gives her some nails to protect her as well. A nail of anger—to wound those who hurt her. A nail of jealousy. A rod of blame.

The play continues, and Sally becomes a teenager. She gives her heart away to her high school boyfriend, Mike. Over the years, more and more pieces of the orange are ripped off, and eventually, even Mike doesn't want her ugly heart anymore. When he gives it back, she melts in devastation.

At the end of her rope and not knowing where to turn, the devil shows up again. He reminds Sally about the twig of bitterness and shows her how it's now grown into a full thornbush.

"Use this to protect your heart," he says.

He then gives Sally a pair of headphones and says, "Wear these all the time, stay busy and distracted, and you won't have to think about the pain and loneliness." He takes dark glasses and places them over her eyes, saying, "These negative glasses will give you a whole new perspective on life and show you how things really are!"

Throughout the skit, Jesus comes onto the scene, asking Sally, "Will you let me love you?" Being present, but not pushy. At one point, Sally finally offers him her heart, but when Jesus holds it, because of the thorns pressing in, it hurts her, and she takes it back.

Sally runs to the devil and tells him her heart hurts when people try to love her, so he gives her his *Armor-All protection plan*. He wraps her heart in aluminum foil.

"Now no one can ever hurt you again."

This is usually the point in the play where my eyeballs start to sweat. When I see Sally, I picture so many actual faces of my teenage friends. There they are, negative glasses covering their eyes, headphones covering their ears. In one hand they're holding anger, jealousy, bitterness, and blame—in the other, a broken heart, covered by aluminum foil, not letting anyone in.

As Sally sleeps on the stage, the narrator speaks over the music: "As time goes by, we find Sally run down from all the activities, still with a gnawing dissatisfaction inside. Her toys aren't enough. But she holds onto them because there's no better alternative."

Sally wakes up and wrestles with her thoughts.

*I wonder if there's more to life than these toys. Like God or something. I wonder if he even exists. For that matter, I wonder if he even knows I exist. Even if he did, I doubt he'd care about anyone like me. Especially if he knew everything I've done. God? God, I'm afraid of you. I'm afraid of what you might see, and I'm afraid of what you might ask, but if your love is big enough to reach down*

*and . . . abbb . . . This is stupid. I'm better off playing with my toys and pretending things are OK than simply talking into the air."*

Jesus then removes her headphones. "Here, let me take some of the busyness from you. It only keeps you from hearing me. You see, I came to give hearing to the deaf. Sally, let me remove these glasses from you. They distort your vision and keep you from seeing me as I really am. I came to give sight to the blind."

Gradually, Sally surrenders all her toys to Jesus. He then asks for her heart.

"But it's torn and ugly . . . I don't even want you to look at it! Every time I've given my heart away, I've been hurt: my parents, my friends, Mike, even Satan. They all deceived me. How can you expect me to trust you? It's all I have left."

Jesus gently replies, "Because I died for you. Because I love you. There was no other way for you to be free."

As Sally hands Jesus her aluminum-covered heart, he slowly peels back the foil.

Underneath is a brand-new, shiny orange.

"Sally, I came to heal the brokenhearted. The old has gone, the new has come."

\*\*\*\*\*

Maybe you recognize some of your teenage friends, or even your own children, in the portrait of Sally Smith. Few things are as painful as watching the people you love turn away from the God who loves them.

But this is nothing new. It's been happening since Genesis 3.

Have you ever wondered why loving teenagers is so hard? And why parenting them takes that difficulty to a whole new level? Could it be that the rebellion of our children draws us to more deeply depend upon God? Think about Genesis 3. Adam and Eve rebelled against God, yet even after they were caught, their hearts were not softened to him. What did they do? They covered their shame. Not with aluminum foil, but with fig leaves. They hid. Not in a thornbush, but among the bushes of the garden. They pointed the *rod of blame*—the man toward the woman, and the woman toward the serpent. Then, they were banished from the garden.

In Genesis 4, Adam and Eve become parents. We still see no sign of repentance or the softening of their hearts. Nothing at all . . . until their first-born son killed his little brother. Can you imagine the pain parents would feel if they found out their eldest son had attacked and murdered their baby



boy? Can you hear Adam and Eve wailing in the dark of the night, echoing throughout the forest? Is there any deeper despair than that of losing a child?

Near the end of the chapter, it finally happens—the finale of the Adam and Eve narrative. “At that time people began to call on the name of the LORD” (Genesis 4:26). It wasn’t until after their children rebelled that Adam and Eve willingly turned to God for help.

Parenting is often painful. Pursuing our teenage friends is downright hard. But through it, God is drawing us to himself. He’s saying, “This is way bigger than you, and your giftedness, and your *cool factor*. If you want to do this, you’re going to need *me*.”

Many of our teenage friends are brokenhearted. I imagine they feel as if they’re holding Sally’s mangled orange in their stressed-out hands. But the Lord is inviting us to join in with them, right in the middle of that brokenness, to be what Henri Nouwen calls a *wounded healer*<sup>2</sup>—to remove the foil from our own hearts and share with them our shattered souls. To wail in the woods on their behalf.

This isn’t a journey for the light of heart. This is war. An enemy is seeking to kill, steal, and destroy our kids. God has called us to fight. Not alone, but with the Divine Warrior leading the charge (see Exodus 15:3).

## For Parents

- When have you been vulnerable with your kids? How did that affect your relationship with them?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- What keeps you from being vulnerable with them?



- What makes it hardest for you to pursue your teenage friends? What holds you back?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- Who is your Sally Smith right now?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- What does it practically look like for you to fight for kids?

## **The Word of the Lord**

“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10).

## A Prayer for Broken Hearts

*(Fill in the blanks with the names of the teenagers in your life.)*

Father,

You are the Giver of Life. Your hands pumped the heartbeat into my very chest.

You hold my heart tenderly. You heal my heart completely. You alone make it new.

Would you hold and heal \_\_\_\_\_'s heart?

Jesus,

You are the One whose heart was pierced on the cross.

You understand how it feels when a heart breaks.

Would you come alongside \_\_\_\_\_

and tend to the wounds that can be found there?

Spirit,

You are the Great Comforter.

And even when I don't know the words to pray, you make sense of my wordless sighs and aching groans.

Would you come and help me pray for \_\_\_\_\_?

Would you wail in the woods on my behalf?

I need You. I trust You. Amen.

## CHAPTER 2 || SOS

I'm reaching out, one last plea  
Is hope all gone, somebody save me  
SOS I'm lost at sea  
Is hope all gone, somebody save me.

—Ed Cash, "SOS"

WHAT YOU'RE about to read is, at times, offensive.

To understand how to communicate the gospel to teenagers, we need to understand the language they speak. The following are actual posts written online by my teenage friends. I've removed their names for privacy and chosen to include most of the original language, including profanities and vulgarities.

- I wish I believed I was worth loving.
- I wasted my childhood trying to grow up.
- I'm screaming at the top of my lungs, and no one even turns their head.
- Why do we live in a world where losing your phone is more dramatic than losing your virginity?
- My sister just texted me *I hate men* . . . she's 12 #WhatTheHECK
- Leave it to me to always *f*everything up.
- Why cancer? Tell me why!
- Dear Mom and Dad, cut it out. I can hear you, and IT'S GROSS.
- I hate when my mom talks about how awesome my brother and sister are #IFeelLikeCrapNow
- Why isn't my dad around? #a\*\*hole
- Why do I constantly feel like the biggest financial burden on my parents? #stress
- I told my mom I'm depressed and can't do my homework cause I'm emotionally damaged. She believed me and is taking me to the doc. #LOL
- Girls are always talking about working out for their "spring break bods" . . . most of y'all are gonna look fat no matter what.

- My parents CONSTANTLY put me down in front of others.
- Crying because I'm so exhausted and I want to sleep but I can't because I have so much work.
- Try walking a mile in my shoes, then u can b\*tch at me for not being perfect.
- Thou shalt not ever be pale. #PrettyGirlProblems
- OK, I'm bored. What should I pierce?
- I wish I was close enough with my mom to tell her everything I was feeling right now.
- I hate how trust takes forever to gain and just one stupid thing can make you lose all of it.
- There's no religion that could save me.
- Emotionally . . . I'm done. Mentally . . . I'm drained. Spiritually . . . I feel dead. Yet physically . . . I smile.

Sometimes the cries come in more than 140 characters. One of my high school friends sent me this message. I've received dozens just like it:

Drew,

Last night . . . sh\*t hit the fan, and I mean hard. Everything was going good and then my mom had the great idea to start the timeless argument about how I don't care about school. She called me downstairs and logged into the parent portal to check my grades . . . they were bad. I had pretty much given up hope this year.

As the argument continued, I found myself falling into a pit of deep-seeded hatred and anger for my parents. *They just don't get it*, I thought. I punched my wall, 'cause that's what kids do in movies and stuff, but it kinda hurt, and I didn't feel any better.

My dad is so angry. He took away all my stuff. My phone, my laptop, my friends, my driving privileges for, as he said, "the entire summer." He even told my mom to take away all my clothes except for two pairs of shorts, two pairs of shirts, two pairs of socks, and one pair of shoes. He said my life is going to be like the military. We are talking waking up early, doing chores, and yard work every day this summer.

This is the worst ever. Now I know why people become alcoholics. My parents just don't get what I'm going through. They don't understand my emotions. I feel like nobody understands me.

I have lost touch with God. I'm stupid, worthless, scrawny, ugly, too skinny, no girlfriend, and living for no reason.

My parents came in to say good night to me and told me they were sorry, but they did it 'cause they love me. When they said "Goodnight, love you," all I could mumble was, "I wish the feeling was mutual."

Ben

Can you hear it? They're screaming between the lines. Chase me. Pursue me. Reach out to me. Notice me. Rescue me. Save me!

A few years ago, I took a group of high schoolers to a camp in the North Carolina mountains. A special musician was playing for the weekend. That Saturday morning, he was in his cabin, alone with his guitar, and was able to put words to what our teenage friends are feeling. Less than an hour after he wrote the song, we sang it for the first time. It was a holy moment. More than five hundred high schoolers sang the following at the top of their lungs.<sup>1</sup>

I'm reaching out  
 One last plea  
 Is hope all gone  
 Somebody save me  
 SOS, I'm lost at sea  
 Is hope all gone  
 Somebody save me

I wonder if the kids even realized that when they sang *SOS* it meant *save our souls*. Ed, the camp musician, wrote the following lyrics as the first verse of the song.

I've been blinded by insecurity  
 And all the pain I feel  
 Could be the death of me  
 I'm surrounded by  
 Fear that won't let go  
 If there's a way out  
 Someone let me know

Why did it resonate with my high school friends? Why did it become a defining anthem for the weekend? Why do those kids still love to sing it?

Through the freedom of musical expression, our teenage friends had been given permission to put their arms around one another and sing with all their might, using words they'd thought they could never say out loud. *Somebody save me*. It's a cry of dependence.

I need help.

But the very essence of adolescence tells teenagers they're supposed to be moving out of that stage, moving from dependence to independence.

I no longer need anyone!

I can do it on my own.

I can be independent.

Our teenage friends feel stuck in the space between. They need adults, who they perceive as independent, to show them that yelling SOS isn't a sign they're drowning, but a sign they're alive.

A few thousand years ago, one of the psalmists cried SOS in Psalm 118:25. He prayed, "LORD, save us!" The original Hebrew words gave us our English word *Hosanna*. In the psalm, *Hosanna* was immediately followed by a shout of hope in verse 26: "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD." It's as if the sinking ship sees the Coast Guard coming at the very moment they shoot the flare.

In the Old Testament, *Hosanna* meant *please save us*. But in the New Testament, it came to have a different meaning. It moved from being a cry for help to a declaration of victory. For hundreds of years, the Israelites had been longing for a king and a deliverer. As Jesus entered Jerusalem during the Passover week, the people lined the streets and shouted those words of victory. "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" The Savior they had been longing for had finally arrived.

As we share the gospel with our teenage friends, we get to tell them the truth. We get to show them that crying SOS isn't just a shout of surrender but a declaration of victory. We get to create safe spaces for them to wave their arms like a drowning child and scream, "save me." But we also get to share with them the even better news that *Hosanna* no longer just means *save me*. It now means *salvation has come*. And we get to tell them that salvation has a name. His name is *Jesus*.

## For Parents

Consider asking your teenager to join you for a late-night snack before bed. Let him read over the online posts in the preceding pages, written by actual



teenagers. Ask your teenager if the posts accurately describe his peers. Ask him to circle any of them he can personally relate to.

Consider sharing as honestly as you can with him. What has Jesus rescued you from? Share about what your most honest online posts might say. Both when you were a teenager and even now. Ask him to pray for you and ask how you can pray for him.

## For Those in Youth Ministry

Consider sharing these online posts with your middle and high school friends. You could use it in a talk with your youth ministry or in a small group discussion. You can download PowerPoint and Keynote slides of all the online posts, along with a printable PDF, at [AlongsideTeenagers.com](http://AlongsideTeenagers.com).

After you share these posts, consider asking your teenage friends to write down their own. Give them the option to turn them in anonymously or to include their names if they feel so inclined. A helpful question you could ask might simply be, “What do you need Jesus to rescue you from?”

## For Both Parents and Those in Youth Ministry

My friend Megan Harvey led a small group Bible study with high school girls in our hometown. One day, I saw her carrying a big stack of journals and asked her about them. She said they were *exchange journals*, and a way for the girls in her group to have a safe space to be completely honest with their thoughts and questions. Each week, at their Bible study, Megan would get them from the girls and take them home to read. She then would write a letter to each of them in the journals, and a couple days later, return their journals when she ate lunch with them at school. The girls would read what Megan wrote and repeat that process every week.

Some pages were filled with doodles and drawings. Others were filled with Scripture verses, written in girly fonts. But some were covered with words, broken hearts spilled out on tear-soaked pages.

It won't work with every single kid, but even though I'm a guy, I would've loved that opportunity for a safe place to share my thoughts and questions during my teenage years. Consider giving exchange journals a shot, either with your own children or those involved in your youth ministry. If you do it, make sure to recognize the bravery in their honesty and praise their willingness to give it a chance.

## The Word of the Lord

“It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. Jesus is ‘the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone.’ Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:10–12).

## A Prayer of Surrender

Hosanna,

My own efforts continue to fail me, so I lay down my self-sufficiency.

With arms now empty, I wave them like a drowning child.

I cry out to you, “Save me!”

I cry out to you, “Save \_\_\_\_\_.”

I’ve been blinded by insecurity.

Open my eyes to see through the confident lens of the cross.

\_\_\_\_\_ has been blinded by insecurity.

Open \_\_\_\_\_’s eyes to see through the confident lens of the cross.

I’ve been surrounded by fear that won’t let go.

Pry open fear’s grip and surround me with angel armies.

\_\_\_\_\_ has been surrounded by fear that won’t let go.

Pry open fear’s grip and surround \_\_\_\_\_ with angel armies.

Jesus, I cry out to you, and declare the victory of your name, *Hosanna*—salvation has come! Amen.

## CHAPTER 3 || DEEP END

But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink,  
cried out, "Lord, save me!"

—Matthew 14:30

IT WAS a Thursday night in early July. Many of our friends gathered at the neighborhood pool. Burgers sizzled on the grill and background music from The Zac Brown Band made it feel as though we found our own little paradise. After dinner, we gathered all the sinking rings and wet beach towels and pushed the stroller home. An hour later, we heard the ambulance racing by.

Some of our closest friends had stayed at the pool with their four kids, all under the age of seven. In a split second, with their backs turned in conversation, their two-year-old daughter jumped in. But Anna Claire didn't know how to swim. She happened to drop in directly below the lifeguard stand—just out of view of the very person who had been trained to save her. Another six-year-old girl saw what happened and rushed to tell her mother, Rebecca.

Pointing and in a confused voice, she said, "Mommy, that little girl with blond hair fell under the water and hasn't come up yet."

Without hesitation, and not even knowing who the little girl was, Rebecca raced to the edge of the pool and yanked up sweet Anna Claire. She looked lifeless and blue. A few off-duty doctors and nurses swarmed to her side. An ambulance was there in minutes. After a night in the hospital, by God's grace, Anna Claire went home the next day. No permanent damage had been done.

As a dad of three, I've changed the way I parent at the pool after the night of Anna Claire's accident. Since then, it's been a little harder to relax. I imagine that will change once all our kids learn to swim, but one thing will never change: Whether they're mine or not, there will always be little ones at our pool who don't know how to swim. There will always be kids who are seconds away from drowning.

Dozens of adults were at the pool that night. Any one of them would have done the exact same thing Rebecca did, if only they had noticed that Anna Claire was in trouble.

My guess is that one of the reasons you're holding this book is that you're an adult who *has* noticed. You've noticed children drifting into the deep end without quite knowing how to swim. All of a sudden, the teenagers in your life have transitioned from the shallow end of childhood into the deep end of puberty, and all that goes with it.

You want to reach out. Your heart longs to rescue them. But you also feel overwhelmed and insecure. You wonder if you have what it takes. Anna Claire didn't need an expert swimmer—she just needed a hand. You would never think of watching a little girl drown just because you weren't lifeguard certified. Like Anna Claire, teenagers just need someone who cares, someone willing to show up and reach out. Prior experience is not required.

Last night, I received a text message from a friend who leads a small group of middle school girls:

Drew, why am I doing this? I can't translate "middle school girl talk." I try really hard to understand these girls, but I don't at all, because my life in middle school looked SO different from theirs. They ask me for advice on things I'm not really equipped to give advice on. I'm too young. I really don't think I have anything to offer them. I'm too inconsistent. And I'm struggling to have the time and patience needed to love them well. They deserve better than that. I just am not sure I should be leading.

Earlier in the day, I had a long conversation with a mother who had recently chaperoned her middle school daughter's field trip. She wanted to process the change she was watching happen in her little girl. To her, it seemed as if they had moved from mother-daughter best buds to complete strangers overnight.

"How can I reach out to her when she just slaps my hand away?"

Being a youth leader, teacher, coach, or anyone who spends time with teenagers can feel a lot like riding a high-speed roller coaster. It's a thrill of a ride, but you often wonder if you're going to survive and why the heck you went to a theme park in the first place. It's hard on the heart.

Parenting teenagers is much the same. The main difference is the roller coaster seems to never stop. Teenagers are intimidating, time-consuming,

costly, and messy. If we want to reach them with the gospel—if we want to keep them from drowning—we can no longer simply invite them to come take our class on water safety. Attractional youth programs are not going to get the job done. Parenting lectures typically don't change hearts.

Making disciples is an act that calls for embodied presence. It requires sharing our lives. It demands that we plunge into the deep end—even if we're not convinced *we* know how to swim.

## For Parents

I have many fond memories from my days as a young kid at the pool: Marco Polo, cannonball contests, sharks and minnows, and those Nestlé Drumsticks™ with a chunk of chocolate in the bottom of the cone. But something happened around age twelve: the pool got complicated. All of a sudden, I was embarrassed to take off my shirt. I don't think I gained that much weight overnight, or that my skin became any paler. But I do think I saw someone completely different when I looked in the mirror. Someone I didn't like as much.

Adolescence tends to have that effect on children. In a flash, it seems that the early days of splashing in the shallow end come to a screeching halt. Suddenly, teenagers can find themselves drifting to the deep end where it feels much harder to swim.

- Do you remember what that transition from childhood to adulthood felt like? Do you remember the confusion you experienced? Are you showing your child the same grace you wish your parents had shown you? What do you recall about your teenage years?
  
- When you think about your relationship with your own parents, what do you wish they had done differently to pursue you during your teenage years? Take a minute and write down some of your thoughts here. I wish my own parents would have . . .

## For Those in Youth Ministry

- Who reached out to you and helped pull you from the “deep end”?  
What did they do that affected you?

Maybe no one reached out to you, and you still play the “what if” game in your head. “What if an adult had pursued me when I was a lost teenager?” Now’s your chance to give someone that gift you were never given.

## The Word of the Lord

“‘Come,’ he said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’ Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him” (Matthew 14:29–31).

## A Prayer for Courage

Lion of Judah,

I know if I could see you, my insecurities would sink like a dumb-bell in the deep end.

If I was aware that Aslan walked by my side, I could face any foe.

Would you remind me of your powerful presence and be the lifter of my head?

Lamb of God,

You reached out and rescued Peter when he was sinking and afraid.

Would you rescue me too?

Would you help me reach out to \_\_\_\_\_ and pull your beloved from the water?

Give me the courage of a lion and the meekness of a lamb, so that I may bear your image rightly and boldly surrender to you. Amen.