

Feeding Faith:

A Children's Ministry Recipe for Rescuing a Lost Generation

by

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First Edition.

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Part 1: Setting the Table

“You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

Psalm 23:5

Chapter 1

The Fall:

Why so many kids are leaving the church

I'm not normal.

It's okay, I made peace with that a long time ago, and honestly, most people around me have too. My family especially. They get a front-row seat to my quirks every single day. Something I hear over and over from my kids is, "Dad, can we please take a normal vacation this year?" By normal, they mean somewhere with toilets and running water. I'll protest, "What are you talking about? The wilderness has tons of running water!" But then they'll remind me it needs to be running out of a faucet, not a mountain.

They're right, though. Most of our family vacations involve some sort of outdoor adventure. When the kids were little, it was tent camping in national parks across the country. But as they got older, I started upping the ante, longer trips, tougher trails, and eventually, multi-week treks deep into the backcountry. So it was no surprise to them this summer when I pitched the idea of a grand adventure through the Peruvian Andes, an idea I got from a movie called *Touching the Void*.

Touching the Void combines two of my favorite things: documentaries and survival stories. It tells the true story of British climbers Joe Simpson and Simon Yates, who set out to climb Siula Grande in the Cordillera Huayhuash, a rugged corner of the Peruvian Andes. After Simpson broke his leg high on the mountain, Yates tried lowering him down on a rope during a storm but was eventually forced to cut the line to save himself. Against all odds, Simpson survived the fall into a crevasse and crawled back to base camp, making it one of the most extraordinary survival stories in mountaineering history.

So naturally, after watching the movie for the dozenth time, I thought, "I've got to go there! Better yet, why not take the family?"

I know—not normal.

In my defense, I wasn't actually planning on climbing Siula Grande like Joe and Simon, I just wanted to visit Lake Sarapachoca, the location of their base camp. And despite requiring off-trail navigation through harsh, remote mountain terrain, this wasn't beyond my level of expertise. Nor was this beyond the ability of my family. We've done tough terrain before, my wife included. But mountains have a way of humbling even the most prepared hikers, and it didn't take long for me to learn that lesson firsthand.

After successfully navigating to the lake, we stood surrounded by jagged peaks that clawed at the sky, with the hulking face of Siula Grande looming over us like a stone giant wearing a cap of snow and ice, God's majesty evident in every direction. We could hardly pull ourselves away from the breathtaking scenery, but daylight was burning and we still had a lot of hard miles to cover. So up we went, not toward the summit of Siula Grande, but over a mountain pass on the opposite side of the lake. As we descended the other side of the steep pass, I became concerned that the route we had chosen was leading toward sheer drop-offs with no safe way down, so I told my family to stay put while I descended further to get a better view. And that's when it happened.

One moment, I was moving carefully along a rocky ledge. The next, the stone gave way beneath me. It felt like a bad dream—I was in a free-fall, flipping and twisting in the air for what seemed like forever, yelling loudly the entire way down. It was chaotic and terrifying. And the impact was violent. In all, I fell about 10 feet into a rocky ravine, then slid down the mountain for roughly another 10 feet before coming to a stop.

As if that wasn't enough, when I opened my eyes and looked up, there was an Andean Condor circling directly above me. Now, on any other day, seeing a condor—a rare, majestic bird with a ten-foot wingspan—would have thrilled me. But scavengers circling you after a fall? Not super comforting. By the grace of God, though, I wouldn't be on his menu that day.

Even now, I still think about the miracle in that moment. Of all the countless ways I could have landed, I landed in the one position that let me walk away with the least amount of damage. The impact could have broken my neck, crushed my skull, or even ended my life—but instead, I landed on my back, cushioned by the giant pack I was wearing.

Shortly after sitting up, I began assessing the damage: whiplash, a concussion, bloody lacerations, a broken thumb, and a deep muscle contusion to my right leg. Bad, but not “condor happy meal” bad. So why tell this story?

Well, first of all, it just happened, so it's fresh on my mind. In fact, even as I type this, my right thumb is still broken and struggles to hit the space bar. But more importantly, it's a picture of what's happening to kids in our churches today. They too are navigating dangerous terrain, not of rock and ice, but culture. A landscape of moral decay, skepticism, relativism, and atheism. The path is steep and the drop-offs are everywhere. And just like me, they don't always know they're in danger until the ground gives way. They fall into doubt. Confusion. Temptation. Shame. Apathy. Despair. And forces of spiritual darkness circle overhead, ready to devour.

By the grace of God, some rise again. But sadly, many don't. Study after study confirms what a lot of us have seen firsthand: a heartbreaking number of kids raised in church walk away from their faith as young adults.

The Alarming Numbers Behind the Exodus of Faith:

- **61%** of young adults ages 18-29 who were active in church in their teens say they are now spiritually disengaged—no longer attending, reading Scripture, or praying regularly.¹
 - Only **1 in 5** maintain the spiritual habits they practiced as teens.²
 - By **2050**, up to **35 million** young people raised in Christian homes may leave the faith.³
 - Some projections show that if current trends continue, **less than half** of Americans may identify as Christian by 2070.⁴
-

What feels like a looming crisis for the American church is already a lived reality across much of the Western world. Canada has crossed the threshold into a post-Christian culture, where Christianity no longer holds a central place in public life. Europe has been there for decades. In places like the United Kingdom, cathedrals now stand as monuments to a faith that once thrived but now feels like a relic of the past. If you want a glimpse of where the American church might be headed, you only need to look across the Atlantic.

Having been in children's ministry for more than 25 years, I can't say I'm surprised. Much of what we've been feeding children is less than spiritually nourishing. Too often, what kids receive at church is the spiritual equivalent of fast food. It's quick, it's easy, it's fun in the moment, and it may even leave them feeling full for a little while. But just like fast food, it lacks the deep nourishment their souls need to grow strong and healthy. A steady diet of upbeat songs, funny skits, and surface-level Bible lessons may keep kids entertained, but it doesn't prepare them for the hard climbs of life or the inevitable falls they'll face. Without real substance, their faith ends up malnourished—satisfying for a season, but unable to sustain them in the long run. But "fast food" lessons aren't the only problem.

¹ Barna Group, *Most Twentysomethings Put Christianity on the Shelf Following Spiritually Active Teen Years* (2006), <https://www.barna.com/research/most-twentysomethings-put-christianity-on-the-shelf-following-spiritually-active-teen-years/>

² Barna Group, *Resilient Disciples: Five Practices for Forming Faith That Lasts* (2019), <https://www.barna.com/research/resilient-disciples/>

³ Pinetops Foundation, *The Great Opportunity: The American Church in the 2050s* (2018), <https://www.greatopportunity.org/the-size-of-the-opportunity/>

⁴ Pew Research Center, *Modeling the Future of Religion in America* (September 2022), <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/13/modeling-the-future-of-religion-in-america/>

In many churches, kids are also getting what amounts to a fad diet of faith. You've seen those diets that focus on just one food group, the potato diet, the grapefruit diet, or the all-meat "carnivore" craze. There's even a fitness influencer nicknamed The Liver King who built an entire brand around eating raw organ meat to achieve a "primal" physique. But when he eventually admitted to using steroids to maintain his image, he also confessed that his diet had left him starving and unbalanced.

That happens in church too. Some ministries pile their plates high with biblical knowledge. But without teaching kids how to live it out or helping their hearts respond to God, the truth never moves beyond their heads. Others gorge on feel-good character lessons—be kind, be brave—but skip a solid foundation in Scripture or a call to follow Jesus. In both cases, kids miss out on a full, healthy diet of discipleship that helps them grow strong in their faith.

This is the crisis facing children's ministry today. Too many kids are being fed either spiritual junk food that gives a quick burst of energy but no lasting strength, or an unbalanced fad diet that overfeeds one part of discipleship while starving the rest. The result is a generation whose faith looks full on the surface but is malnourished underneath.

And the statistics bear it out, what feels satisfying in childhood often collapses under the weight of real life. By the time many reach college or the workforce, they find themselves without the depth, resilience, or personal relationship with Jesus to sustain them. Quietly, they drift away.

But this crisis isn't just about numbers on a page. It has names and faces. For me, one of those faces is a little girl named Sara.

I met Sara when she was four years old, in my very first small group at Promiseland. I was in my early twenties, still figuring out what I wanted to do with my life, and Sara was the kind of kid who makes you think, *If this is what children's ministry is like, sign me up forever.*

She had brown hair, big brown eyes, and a smile that could light up an entire room. From the moment we met, we were best buds. Every Sunday, when she walked in, her eyes would scan the room until they found Mr. David. Then she'd run to give me a big hug. During small group time, she would always sit right next to me and hold my hand. She was the kind of kid everyone wants in their group—she listened, she raised her hand when she had something to say, and she seemed genuinely excited to learn about God.

One week, she walked into church holding a little blank book, the kind with empty pages inside and a plain white cover you can decorate. On the front, she had drawn a picture of the two of us with a sun and a rainbow behind us. Underneath, in big, careful preschool letters, she wrote: "David's Love Journal. Sara." Later, her mom pulled me aside and explained that it was supposed to say, "David's Journal. Love, Sara." I didn't care. To this day, I still call it my Love Journal. I've kept it all these years.

Eventually, though, Sara started kindergarten and graduated out of my room. I still remember how sad I felt that first Sunday she wasn't in my circle anymore. Since then, I've had hundreds of kids in my small groups, but Sara is the one I remember most fondly.

After she moved out of my group, I did my best to stay connected. I'd occasionally see her in the hallways or the lobby at church. We'd share a quick hug and catch up. But we were at a big church, so as the years went by, I saw her less and less until I didn't see her at all. In the meantime, what I didn't realize was that Sara was already starting to walk along some very dangerous cliffs of her own.

When she was six, someone in her extended family—an uncle who should have protected her—abused her. Adults spoke with her briefly about what happened, but then the conversations stopped. To Sara, it felt like it was quietly brushed aside, like people had moved on while she was still carrying the weight. Some relatives even hinted that it was somehow her fault. Imagine being six years old and trying to make sense of that.

In the following years, the hits kept coming. In elementary school, her parents got divorced. In middle school, she was bullied. In high school, she tried to stay connected to church and even joined a house group, but she never really felt like she fit in. One night in that group, a leader publicly accused her and her boyfriend of being sexually active when they weren't. She was humiliated and hurt. As a result, the relationship ended, and the trust she had in Christian adults cracked a little more.

A short time later, a friend of her ex-boyfriend told her she had left her purse at his house and invited her over to get it. When she arrived, he assaulted her. They went to the same high school, which meant she had to walk the halls with him and his friends afterward. She was bullied, targeted, and deeply afraid. The school eventually stepped in. The police were involved. But in the end, it came down to a "he said, she said" situation, and justice felt out of reach.

Through all of this, Sara kept going to church. She kept showing up to her house group. From the outside, it probably looked like she was doing "all the right things." But on the inside, she was going numb. Church had become something she did mostly out of habit, and because her mom wanted her to go. Any real sense of a living relationship with God felt distant, buried under layers of pain, confusion, and shame.

In college, she started dating a guy who became increasingly controlling and abusive—emotionally, mentally, physically. At one point, he kept her trapped in his house for five days. When she finally broke things off, he retaliated by assaulting her again. This time, she became pregnant. She was nineteen.

Sara continued attending church during her pregnancy, but even there, the hurt followed her. An older couple she had once seen as spiritual grandparents stopped talking to her when they found out she was expecting. It breaks my heart to imagine how alone she must have felt. Even now, I wish I could go back in time, wrap my arms around that pregnant nineteen-year-old, and tell her, "It's going to be okay. God loves you. And so do I."

Shortly after her twentieth birthday, Sara gave birth to her son, Dakota. The baby's father denied he was the dad and has never been part of their lives—a painful reality, but in some ways, a strange kind of mercy too.

After Dakota was born, church was complicated. Sara kept attending for a while—hoping to find a boyfriend, hoping to find community, hoping to feel something again. For a time, she was part of a small group she really loved, but eventually that group dissolved. And with it, the last thread holding her to the church broke. After that, she never returned.

The little girl who once gave me a Love Journal... the child who was my Sunday-morning shadow, who listened and learned and raised her hand and sat close by my side... the kid I remembered as a bright, joyful four-year-old—she grew up, walked into a world full of cliffs and ledges, and fell hard. And in the aftermath, she became one of the many who quietly drifted away.

I wish I could tell you that Sara's story is rare. It isn't. There are Saras in every children's ministry—kids we adore, kids who bring us joy, kids whose faces we can still picture years later. We see them sitting in our circles, singing our songs, answering our questions. What we don't see—what we often can't see—are the hidden battles they'll face once they leave our rooms: abuse, betrayal, bullying, doubt, shame, loneliness, bad theology, shallow discipleship, and sometimes, a church that doesn't quite know how to walk with them through the mess.

Friends, we have to do better. The faith of an entire generation is at stake, and we can't afford to keep serving up half-meals of discipleship. If we don't act now, we risk watching more and more kids quietly slip away from the church—and from Jesus Himself.

This is the reality we cannot ignore. Sara's story is not an outlier—it's a mirror held up to us as ministry leaders, reminding us that kids are filtering through our ministries, then stepping into a world full of cliffs they were never prepared to face. And far too many, like Sara, have fallen.

So the question we must wrestle with is this: When the ground gives way beneath the kids in our ministries—and it will—will the faith we've helped build in them be strong enough to hold? Because the stakes couldn't be higher. We're not merely entertaining children for an hour a week. We're shaping souls who will one day walk through valleys we cannot yet imagine. If all we offer them is spiritual fast food or unbalanced fad diets, we shouldn't be surprised when their faith collapses under the weight of real life.

There has to be a better way. A way to move beyond shallow lessons and one-dimensional discipleship. A way to give kids a faith with depth, resilience, and roots strong enough to withstand the storms ahead.

In the chapters that follow, we're going to explore what that looks like. The hunger in this generation is real. The question is—will we continue serving what leaves them weak, or will we finally prepare a feast that truly satisfies?

