

I would have to say one of the most vivid images in my head from that week is late Monday night. I left Aaron's family and met Brandon Barlow at the church. We went over to Sean's house and told his parents what happened and waited for Sean to get home. We sat Sean and his girlfriend April Olsen down and I told them about the tragic accident.

April began to sob, but Sean just stared at me, I don't know if he was waiting for me to tell him it was a joke or if he was in shock. I had to tell him, "Sean, this really happened, he's dead." It was at this point that I realized why death was not in God's original plan for man, because it leaves you so empty and broken. I saw that brokenness in a teen who just lost his best friend. But moments later, as Sean's friends started gathering at his house, I watched the healing and growth begin as they wept and prayed together.

It was at this point that God truly began to weaken me. His grace was really sufficient for me (2 Corinthians 12:9). I could not rely on my own power, because I was in shock and grief just like everyone else. Aaron died on Monday, Lisa and the boys flew out of town to a wedding on Wednesday and I felt alone. I had never really experienced anything like this, and now I had a broken family, friends, a school and youth group all grieving and looking to me for answers, comfort and support. I just wanted to crawl into a hole and escape the reality of what had just happened. But instead I was driving kids to view Aaron's body, counseling, doing on-the-spot Bible studies about heaven, doing group grief counseling and writing a funeral message in my spare time.

God's grace came in many forms: Through talking to my wife daily on the phone. And, by knowing that she, my family and people nationwide were praying for us. God sent me another area youth pastor to come in and help counsel. I had an elder who is like my Oregon dad to me take me under his wing for the week. I found out that God's grace and strength is not fairy dust that you sprinkle on. It is real and comes in many forms from the people around you.

Since Aaron's death, our youth group has changed. When I talk about life after death they listen. Heaven is a reality to our students, and so is hell. So they talk to their friends about eternity. More than 20 students, including Aaron's sister, Savannah, Josh and April have committed their life to the Lord and were baptized in six short weeks and there are more to come. Our atten-

dance has increased and many of these new people are hungry for the Lord. Their hearts have been softened and they are looking for something more, much like Aaron was. *Switchfoot* has a line in a song that says, "Everything inside screams for second life." So many of my peers say that kids are only interested in the here and now. But our students concern themselves with the second life, heaven, and how to get there.

Aaron was a great person; I still think of him a lot. I grew closest with him in Mexico and in my office talking about baptism. Aaron is a perfect example of someone saved by grace (Ephesians 2:8). When we talked about him accepting the Lord he was concerned because he had sin in his life. He wanted to fix his life up first and then come to Jesus. I told him that if someone breaks their arm, they don't sit at home and try to fix it on their own first. No, they go to the doctor and let him take care of it. This clicked in his head. He understood that the only way to get rid of the guilt of sin was to bring it to the Doctor and He would fix it.

The joy of the Lord then consumed Aaron. Everyone around him noticed. He tried to talk to his sister about the Lord and she argued and argued with Aaron about trivial theological points and made lots of excuses. Aaron grew frustrated and left her saying, "All that I know is when I die, I know that am going to heaven." Now that Aaron is there, Savannah understands and has caught that same passion.

I am convinced that God strengthens us through our weakest of times if we allow him to do so. He has carried our youth group all summer long and into the school year. We have grown, and as Paul said in Romans 8, "*neither death nor life can separate us from the love of Christ Jesus*".



Life After Death

by Bob Witte

It's Hard to Believe What Happened

I said it week after week. At the end of nearly every youth worship service I warned my students not to walk out the door without talking to someone about accepting Jesus because you never know when you will die. Then it happened, one of them did die and our youth group has never been the same.

I met Aaron Wagner on a Wednesday night. He was full of energy and was looking for something more than football and drama from school. He wanted something deeper. He found that something, or better yet, that Someone through his friend Sean and a loving, accepting youth group. He was showing up every week and Sean shared the Gospel of Jesus with him. Then, one week after our Spring Break Mexico trip, Aaron was baptized.

Aaron was not a perfect kid. But he was 16 and everyone could see that he was on fire for Jesus. He began growing in the Lord and witnessing to his friends and family. One sunny Monday in June, Aaron brought his friend Josh up to the church to chat with me about Josh becoming a Christian and going to a Christ In Youth conference. Aaron, Josh, Sean, some other students and I went to grab some ice cream. We laughed and talked about his relationship with the Lord and soon after the kids all parted ways. Aaron and Sean went to watch a

movie. A little after 7:00 p.m., Aaron headed for home on his bike.

I got the call around 9:30 p.m. Aaron was hit by the MAX Train (a light rail tram that runs through town) in a crosswalk. I remember arriving at the house, shocked and scared. I barely knew any of the family and nothing I would say could change what happened. There were lots of family, detectives, city crisis counselors and me. Kevin and Darla, Aaron's parents, sat me down and wanted to know everything that happened that day since we were together up until about 5:00 p.m. I told them and we all joined hands as I prayed.

A Youth Pastor's Perspective

After we prayed with tears, Darla looked straight into my eyes and said, "Please tell me you prayed with my son. Did you pray with Aaron?" I never wanted to lie so bad just to comfort her. We shared Scripture, witnessed to a friend and had fun, but I had to tell her no, we did not pray that particular day. That one question revolutionized the way I do ministry and look at people. My title at Mountainview has always been youth pastor, and after Darla asked me that question I understand what that means now. I am to be a loving shepherd, a pastor to my flock. I pray more with students, more hugs, more notes, more guidance, and overall, more love.