

Ryan Dobson ↔ Toben Heim

Wrecked

What God can do when things crash and burn

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Wrecked: What God Can Do When Things Crash and Burn

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We have come across dozens of people in our years of ministry who have shared their stories with us, many of whom appear in part in this book. However, we have done our best to change key details to make these people unrecognizable—their stories are theirs to tell, and we do not want to overstep those boundaries in this book. In other places we have combined elements of similar stories for the sake of making a more concise point. Please take the stories, all of which have a basis in truth, as they were intended—as opportunities for growth, as they have been for us.

*Throughout my life, in the good times
and the bad times, there have been many people who have
stood by my side and supported me, but none more
than my parents. Mom and Dad, this book
is dedicated to you. Without your guidance, advice,
wisdom, and prayers I wouldn't be the man I am today.
I hope I'm making you proud. Thank you so much.*

—R. D.



*To Joanne, who has stuck with me through
thick and thin . . . and really thin.*

—T. H.

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Feeling Wrecked?

If anyone knows what it's like to be wrecked, it's us. Between the two of us we've been through a life-threatening illness (including a month spent in the hospital), financial stress, relational failures, the loss of a job, the unexpected loss of a loved one, struggles with acute materialism, clinical depression, bipolar disorder, alcoholism, and divorce.

Somewhere in your gut, you probably have a pretty good idea what it looks like—and feels like—to be wrecked. Chances are you've been wrecked at some point in the past. You might be standing, sitting, or sprawling in the middle of your life's wreckage right now. And unfortunately, you'll most likely have a wreck or five in the future. You're surrounded, too, by thousands of other people who

are at this very moment completely, utterly, and hopelessly wrecked. Whether they show it on the outside or not.

Have you ever been in a car wreck? Living in Colorado, we both have spent our share of time driving on icy roads. We've both been in car accidents. (No, not serious ones, thankfully. But enough to know that gut-tearing feeling when you see another car veer into your lane.)

Or when you slam on the brakes because the car you were following too closely comes to an instant dead stop.

Or when you realize you cut the corner too tight, too fast, and your tires lose traction.

And you start to slide.

In those seconds you feel absolutely helpless. Completely out of control. Something bad is about to happen, and you can't stop it. It's *going* to happen. Time is suspended. The seconds stretch on. Your thoughts race. You're about to lose your lunch.

You brace for impact.

You pray.

You scream.

Then impact.

Watching yourself slide helplessly toward a life wreck can have that same sense of inevitability. Your adrenaline spikes, and all you can do is cover your face. And you know: This is going to hurt.

Death, taxes, and wrecks. Life guarantees them all. And it's not like chicken pox—down once and safe forever. No one is immune to fresh disaster. That's a tough pill to swal-

low, because a lot of us, especially Christians, have created a fantasy reality where if we stay “inside God’s will” and make all the right choices, we’ll somehow avoid life’s really big smackdowns.

Nice try. But it won’t happen.

Want proof? Pick up your Bible and try to find one individual who loved God and was loved by God who didn’t go through some seriously tough times. Go to the New Testament, the Old Testament—it doesn’t matter. Everywhere you look, you’ll find people who did everything right and still got squeezed through some agonizing wringer.

Your own circle of friends and family is proof. Look carefully. Can you find that one person who has somehow made it past twenty without heartache? Some people may look like they have it all together, like unscathed survivors. But the scars are there. You see them when you get to know their hearts, when their defenses drop and they tell their stories . . . the real stories.

The more people you meet, the firmer your realization: No one gets a wreck-free life.

Now finally, take a look at your own life. Pain is part of the human experience. It’s built in, a standard feature. Comes with the package, whether you ask for it or not. It stems from something that happened at the very beginning with a couple of your relatives—Adam and Eve. They blew it for all of us. (Of course, we would have, too. So don’t hate them.)

We can be wrecked in a bunch of different ways, but they all boil down to three basic flavors: wreckage from sin, wreckage from circumstances, and—ready for this?—wreckage from *obedience*.

Of course, we expect bad fruit from the first category, when we make wrong choices, when we sin. Habitual speeders are crashes (or tickets) waiting to happen. Are we shocked when the inevitable comes down? Probably not. Disappointed, angry . . . but not surprised.

Now, we may not like the second category, but we know that circumstances can wreck us too. Look around at events of the past few years in places like Southeast Asia and New Orleans. Tsunamis and Katrinas. We know that uncontrollable circumstances can take us down. Closer to home, divorce hurts kids who had nothing to do with the problem. Addiction robs innocent families of moms and dads, sons and daughters. Sickness and accidents rip loved ones from our arms. Circumstances sometimes seem to hunt us down, conspiring to wreck us.

The third category is less obvious. It's not a popular message, inside or outside church walls, that *doing the right thing* can totally wreck us. But this truth couldn't be more obvious in Scripture. Doing what God calls us to do doesn't guarantee an easy, carefree life. In fact, it usually promises just the opposite. According to tradition, ten of Jesus' disciples—the venerable founders of Christianity—were executed. Hebrews 11 is a catalog of godly people who, through the ages, suffered every kind of hardship

imaginable. Persecution, destitution, starvation, homelessness, prison, beating, stoning, torture, murder.

Matthew 7:13-14 says this: “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.”

The wide path. The easy route. Going with the crowd, drifting with the current. Lots of opportunities to blow it, to sin, to be hurt by other people’s sins. It’s simple math: Regular exposure to sin behaviors—yours or others’—is a spawning ground for tragedy.

But avoiding wreckage isn’t easy. It would be nice if following the narrow path, the path that Christ calls us to, guaranteed we wouldn’t get hurt. But here’s the thing: We’ll get wrecked in some way no matter what path we follow. Obedience isn’t a bulletproof vest. The “armor of God” in Ephesians 6—you know, truth, righteousness, faith . . . all the rest—protects us from sin, not from pain and loss. In fact, Jesus promised that we’d suffer *because* of our obedience.

Wreckage happens. And theories that sound nice on paper evaporate when it happens to you.

Being truly wrecked isn’t about being annoyed or inconvenienced. Or about getting your feathers ruffled. It’s not the missing car keys; you can replace them. Or the test you flunked; you can take the class again. Or the argument with your best friend; you can make up.

Being wrecked means reaching that point where you see no way out. Period. It's when the little light that was at the end of the tunnel goes dark. It's fear and hopelessness and helplessness. It's wanting to give up, concede total failure in life, cash it in for good.

[Toben] *My wife, Joanne, has been there. And I was the cause. I was right in the middle of discovering my bipolar disorder, and I was ineptly trying to self-medicate with alcohol. Our marriage was a disaster. I was no kind of husband. I was ignoring my family.*

Joanne got a lot of advice from different people. Fortunately some counseled her to hang on. But others advised the opposite. In the darkness of that time, there were some who saw the situation as so bleak that she should give me the boot and file for divorce. That would have been the easier way for her to go. But in that darkness, she chose to wait it out.

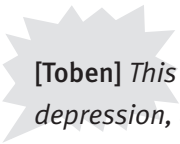
Most of us know that dark place. We see no exit signs. The good options seem to have disappeared, and the ones that remain, if we're left with any choice, guarantee only grief. That's being wrecked.

Maybe you're wrecked in a way that's apparent only to you. No one else sees your struggle. You're having a hard time controlling your thoughts; your mind wanders—or lunges—to places you wish it wouldn't go, and you can't see any mental off-ramps. You, like the apostle Paul, “have

the desire to do what is good, but . . . cannot carry it out” (Romans 7:18).

Or maybe you’re feeling nostalgic for an old, abandoned sin—something you’ve tried to put behind you but that still has a hold on you. “How your body still remembers things you told it to forget. How those furious affections followed you.” Does that line from the Weakerthans’ song “Watermark” describe you?

Or maybe anxiety has your number—pervasive worry, dread, depression. You feel utterly isolated. You can’t get outside your own head. No one knows, so they can’t help. Your inner wreckage is sucking you into a void.



[Toben] *This is familiar territory for me. I’ve wrestled with depression, anxiety, and bipolar disorder for years. It wrecked me for years before I began to deal with it. I had sunk so deep into that abyss that by the time I got help it took me two years and untold thousands of dollars for counseling and medication to get out. I felt like no one around me knew how to help. And I didn’t know how to ask.*

On the other hand, maybe your wreck is public. Debris from your life is strewn out in plain view, rubble scattered along the highway. At rush hour. Everyone’s gawking, whispering.

A divorce. A destructive relationship. An addictive habit that, to your horror, bobbed up to the surface.

Struggles with your job. Failure with your finances. Or any number of other humiliating revelations.

You want people to think you've got it all together. We all do. And when they see that you don't, the shame can be suffocating. Everyone has advice: Where you went wrong. How you should fix it. You want to do something, but you don't even know where to begin.

What if there was a way to redeem this bad stuff? To turn it into something good. Too good to be true? Good question. We'll talk more about this later.

[Ryan] *I got so tired of hearing “God is doing this for a reason” while I was going through my divorce. As if God caused my divorce, and somehow that was supposed to make me feel better. Why? Well, He’s God, right? And He’s supposedly using the pain to prepare me for something great later in life.*

Whatever, I thought cynically. If it’s all right with You, I’ll just have my marriage back, thanks.

God didn’t cause my divorce. He did allow it to happen as a result of our choices and disobedience. And in His grace He miraculously used it to steer me back on track. (More on that later.)

Maybe your wreck feels an awful lot like being stuck. You're at a dead standstill, paralyzed, unable to get going again. People ask how you are, and you reply fine, thanks—knowing you're far from fine. But you can't even buy a clue as to why.

[Ryan] *I can remember sitting on my couch watching TV several years ago during the worst season of my life. I was sleeping about fifteen hours a day and watching TV all the other hours. I'd quit my job, had no other source of income, and couldn't have cared less. I was on the brink of losing my house. So what? Everything else was gone. Why worry about a house?*

I couldn't see any way out. I'd tried to find one, but after a while I just stopped looking.

Now, it's possible that you're in a rather obscure subset of people: followers of Jesus who actually listen to Him. People who honestly follow Him—in what you *do*, not just in your words and rituals.

And you're wrecked.

You've chosen a path completely outside the norm, a path that you believe God has called you to. You're faithfully walking that path, and your life is anything but rosy. Maybe your family thinks you're nuts, or maybe you can't make ends meet. Maybe when you're alone and quiet, you wonder if you really heard God right or if you misunderstood and made a really bad decision somewhere along the way.

You look for affirmation from God, but a lot of the time you just don't feel it. You poured your life into this calling. So why are things so hard? You play out a script each day, talking yourself into faith, persistence, another twenty-four hours of what you hope is obedience. And you're

afraid that one day you'll forget the script. Then who knows what will happen.

[Ryan] *I ignored God's calling on my life when I first heard it. I felt the call to speak and preach God's message, but I was tired of living hand to mouth. All my friends were getting "real" jobs with steady paychecks. I was getting whatever people decided to pay me. As much as I loved it and felt it was my calling, I turned my back on speaking in exchange for a dream of security that never came true. In fact, I was never more miserable than when I was working a steady job. I knew it wasn't what God had called me to.*

I'm nowhere close to perfect now, but I am in the middle of God's will. I know it. I love it.

And the wreckage goes on.

A Promise

Cheer up! That's right, you *will* be wrecked in your lifetime, probably many times, and for any or all of the reasons we've mentioned. Every time, it will hurt like hell—in the true meaning of that word. And in those terrifying moments, in those bleakest of circumstances, God can do something very good. He can teach us about ourselves. And about Him.

Whatever your situation—whether you're wrecked by sin, by life in general, or by obedience—don't give up hope. You're not alone. God is there. And all of us know what it's like to feel somewhere between a little roughed

up and totally devastated. All of us know that stuck feeling, when we don't seem to have the capacity to break out and move forward.

Each of us has a unique pain history. But although our stories vary from yours in the particulars, the bottom-line emotional themes are common to all humanity. So when God sets a gift in front of us—other people who can tell their stories—we listen, find comfort, and learn.

This is a journey we need to take together.

This book is about two things: first, leaning into and learning from our wrecked times, no matter what causes them; and second, allowing ourselves to be wrecked in a whole new way—in a redeemed way—by a God who loves us too much to let us live forever in a safe, boring comfort zone.

Sounds crazy. We know. But stick with us.

For most of us, this is strange new territory. No one prepared us for the wrecked life. And when it happens, everyone has their own Band-Aids to stick on it. Some say, “Numb out to the pain.” Others say, “Just have all the fun you can.” Even the church doesn't always know how to deal with wrecked people.

Yet somehow God can use our tough times to change us, to make us more like Christ. That's why, amazingly, He actually calls us to lives of wrecked obedience.

Rest assured, we know what we're talking about. This isn't just theory for us. We've lived it.

Why Us?

Maybe you're wondering why a couple of fairly normal guys decided to tackle this topic. For starters, it's something we feel called to. God put it on our minds. It's been stuck there, and He won't let us forget about it. For the six years we've known each other, our conversations, when we're not talking about surfing or skating, have often turned to this topic. Sometimes it's because we're aware of wreckage we see in someone else's life. But just as often we're in the middle of some wreckage of our own. We've been through some real ups and downs together, and this book is the outgrowth of those late-night sessions in the kitchen over coffee when we just opened up and let the pieces of scrap metal fly!

[Ryan] *A friend introduced Toben and me at dinner one night. I was going through my divorce and was just starting to hear God's voice again. In my pain and bitterness, I had blocked it out for a long time. As the night wore on and people started leaving, Tob and I stayed up talking. I don't know why, but I opened up to him and told him my story. I was hurting and he was listening.*

I arrived that night a stranger and left with a friend. I tell people Toben is the brother I never had. I know he'd take a bullet for me, and he also tells me when I'm wrong. I may not like it, but knowing he loves me and has my best interests at heart, I can take it. I'm a better person for having Tob in my life.

You'll hear more details of our stories as we go, but suffice it to say that we have been, currently are, and expect in the future to be, a couple of wrecked guys. We've been wrecked by our own sin and disobedience, wrecked by some really lousy circumstances, and wrecked by doing what God called us to. And we've had the good fortune to have experienced a lot of this stuff together. We've been mirrors to each other, helping each other see ourselves and our motives honestly, reflecting back and forth the lessons we've learned in wreckage school.

Throughout the book we'll tell you lots of stories, most of them about us, and some of them ugly. Why? Because we know what it is to walk the wide path that leads to destruction and carnage. Sometimes people romanticize wreckage and think, *Man, those folks on the wide path seem to be having so much fun. I wish I could do that.* But if you look more closely, you'll see a mess. We know. At times, that mess has been us.

We also want to share with you what we've learned about being wrecked by obedience. We still have a lot we don't understand, and neither of us is immune to making unwise decisions again. But we do know a few things for sure, like the value of walking into wreckage when God says to. We also know that God, in His grace, may give us times of relative peace and quiet. We're incredibly thankful for those, but we guard against believing we're entitled to them.

We like to think of the wrecked life in terms of this

mental image: God puts things into our hands and takes things out as well. If we keep our hands open to Him, He's free to do both easily. But if we clench our fists around the stuff He has temporarily given us, He may have to break our fingers when it comes time to take it out.

We're a couple of wrecked guys who are trying to live that openhanded life, ready for whatever God throws our way. We don't have it all figured out, but we desire to live the best kind of life God wants for us. And from our experiences, that's an attitude God can work with.



Acknowledgments

I have many people to thank. First I want to thank and give special recognition to my friend Toben. It was you who brought the concept of this book to me and helped to coax it out of me. It was difficult to revisit times past, but your friendship and support allowed me to be vulnerable and open in a way I wasn't able to be on my own. I can't thank you enough for the writes, rewrites, and re-rewrites it took to finish this book. I have been honored and blessed to have worked with you. But I am more honored and more blessed to have you as a friend. Thanks for having my back.

Many times it seemed as if this book wasn't going to see the light of day. I want to thank Doug Knox and Tyndale for believing in us and seeing the value in our message. Thanks also to Stephanie Voiland for putting this puzzle together. The final picture really is amazing. God bless you all.

—R. D.

I'd like to thank Stephanie Voiland for all the work she put into this project. I'd like to thank my friend Ryan for

jumping into this project with me and bringing his fresh ideas and so many stories to these pages. Ryan, I know it was a difficult and long road to bring this book into being, but the journey was made easier because we got to walk the path together.

I'd like to thank the people who really taught me the lessons included in these pages: Chuck and Kay Friedenstien, for their steadfast love and support and encouragement; Jim and Susan Hancock, who were there with unconditional love for me when I crashed and burned; Jen and Jay Howver, who put a lot on the line to push me to get the help I needed. I credit you all with saving my life. Finally I want to thank Joanne, Audrey, and Emma—you are my greatest joys. Thanks for giving me those few hours each morning to write this thing. Thanks for your hugs and kisses and other simple expressions of love. And most of all, thanks for being the embodiment of grace. I love you all dearly.

—T. H.

About the Authors

“If I could be doing anything in the world, it would be this.”

With the conviction that comes from knowing your purpose—and loving every minute of it—Ryan Dobson passionately pursues his calling in Christ. From his books to his podcast to his speaking engagements, Ryan uses every opportunity to call people out of the moral relativism in today’s society and into the ultimate adventure of following Christ.

Born in 1970, Ryan grew up as the second of two children of famous family counselor, author, and radio host James Dobson. While many pushed him to follow in his father’s footsteps, Ryan took the time to explore his own gifts while trusting in Jesus as his guide. After graduating from college, Ryan found that his natural talent for public speaking, combined with his passion for youth, soon opened countless doors.

Ryan traveled extensively for years, challenging youth at music festivals, concert tours, youth camps, and conferences. Drawing from his experiences talking first-hand to teenagers and young adults, he wrote his first book, *Be Intolerant*, in 2003. This wake-up call warned young Christians not to fall for the lies of a relativistic,

postmodern society. Described by *Publishers Weekly* as having “a colloquial style with all the subtlety of a two-by-four to the side of the head,” it quickly rose up the sales charts, followed by two more best sellers: *To Die For* and *To Live For*.

Behind the scenes, Ryan has been developing his own base—KOR World Ministries, with the purpose of building passion and identity in followers of Christ (KORWorldMinistries.com). He produces KORcast, a podcast that challenges listeners in the way they interact with culture. He also continues to speak, write, and lead short-term mission trips and men’s retreats.

Ryan has a bachelor’s degree in communication studies from Biola University. He lives in Colorado with his wife, Laura, and their son, Lincoln.

Toben Heim is the coauthor with his wife, Joanne, of *Happily Ever After: A Real Life Look at Your First Year of Marriage . . . and Beyond*, www.mosaixstudy.com/community, www.mosaixstudy.com/men&women, and *What’s Your Story? An Interactive Guide to Building Authentic Relationships*.

Toben and Joanne were high school sweethearts, and he proposed the night before she graduated from high school. They attended Whitworth College in Spokane, Washington, and got married in 1991. Toben graduated in 1993 with a degree in communication studies and lots of

experience in all-night student government meetings as the vice president of the student body.

After a summer in Paris wandering the city and sitting at cafés for hours, the Heims moved to Colorado, where Toben began his career as a road rep for NavPress Publishing Group, traveling to the Northeast and racking up frequent flier miles while visiting bookstores and discovering great Cajun food in New Jersey (who knew?). During the next ten years he became a dad (twice!—to two beautiful girls, Audrey and Emma), the sales and marketing director, and eventually the publisher for *The Message*.

By 2003 the Heims couldn't resist the call of the ocean and moved to Southern California, where Toben worked for Youth Specialties.

In 2006 the Heims moved back to Denver to live near family. Toben now runs his own marketing and publishing consulting firm and drives the carpool each day.