

## THOSE TWO QUESTIONS

My daughter Becky hardly recalls the occasion, but I do. Although she is now in her forties, I still feel like picking her up, hugging her and apologising yet again for what happened.

‘It was nothing,’ she tells me. ‘I can hardly remember it.’ However, the whole thing is vividly etched in my memory and whenever I think about it I still hurt for her.

It was a hot, dry, late summer’s day in Adelaide, South Australia, the driest State in the driest continent on earth. Twelve year-old Becky was a new student at a prestige College, which offered a generous discount to the children of clergy. This was too good an opportunity to miss, but it meant that either we had to drive her each day to and from school or she had to travel by two buses each way to get there. On the day in question, we had promised to pick her up after school.

The College gate opened on to a pleasant, quiet, tree-lined suburban street where other parents were collecting their children as well. We pulled up in our light blue Volkswagen Combi van looking for Becky. There were children everywhere, bustling their way out of the school ground, shouting to one another, waving, laughing, talking, arguing. Just in front of us an impatient mother was trying to hurry two dawdling youngsters to her car. A boy wandered by with one shoe lace undone, his shirt hanging out and his tie dangling loose half-way down his shirt. Three girls stood in a huddle giggling together. A gangling older boy was doing his best to engage an attractive teenage girl in conversation. But Becky was nowhere to be seen.

‘Perhaps she’s around at the other gate,’ suggested Michael, her younger brother by two years. So we drove around the block, but still there was no Becky. We returned to the original meeting place but could not find her.

‘Maybe she forgot and took the bus anyway,’ my wife Vanessa proposed.

We waited a bit longer. It was a dry, hot day; it was uncomfortable and oppressive in the van. Our younger son Clinton was just a baby and he was feeling the heat. We were also impatient to get moving because we had arranged to go for a swim in the pool at the motel where Vanessa’s mother was employed.

‘She’s must have caught the bus,’ Vanessa persisted. ‘Let’s go.’

‘You are probably right,’ I agreed.

So we drove the fifteen minute route to the motel and were soon enjoying welcome relief from the heat as we swam and splashed and jumped or simply relaxed in the pool. After an hour or so, we returned home, expecting to find Becky there. But the house was locked, silent and empty when we arrived.

Worried now, we set off back to the school to search again. It took us half an hour to agitate our way through the late afternoon traffic. The sun flashed and shimmered from the streaming cars and sizzled on the melting bitumen of the road, making me squint as I drove. The air pollution built up, increasing the discomfort of the baking afternoon heat. And there was rising tension in our hearts as we could not help but wonder what might have happened to our daughter.

Finally we were driving down the now quiet street to the school gate looking everywhere for Becky. But still we could not see her.

Michael ran into the school grounds and up and down the street calling her name. There was no reply. The situation was now growing serious. While Vanessa sat in the van with Clinton, I walked to the main road to see if she was there. Then at the corner, on the other side of the busy road, with peak-hour traffic growling its weary way through the heat haze, now compounded by exhaust fumes and hot rubber, emerging from a public telephone box beside the nearby the local store, forlorn and alone, Becky appeared.

I waited for a break in the traffic and dashed to the other side. Becky saw me but did not attempt to run towards me. I guess she was worn out with waiting.

I hurried to her and hugged her. She looked up at me, her eyes wide, not with anger, and not with tears, but with a kind of bewildered, pleading puzzlement. Then she asked me two simple questions I shall never forget. 'Where were you?' she said plaintively. 'Why didn't you come?'

What could I say? I was her father and I had failed to be there when she needed me.

She explained how she had been detained after school for some reason which I cannot remember - it was not important then and nor is it now - and had obviously reached the meeting point after we left.

'I went to the shop for some change to phone you,' she continued. 'But you did not answer. I went back to the shop for more five-cent pieces but every time I called home no one was there.'

'Didn't you realise that if no one answers, you can get your money back?' I asked gently. She shook her head. That made me feel even worse. Thirty years later, I still sometimes have forlorn recollections of my young, blue-eyed, blonde-haired daughter needlessly spending her money on calls that no one would answer. If only I could have been there to protect her.

Still, the reality was that she was safe and sound. We were all soon back in the car and on our way home. And today she can hardly remember.

But the whole affair tugged at my heart strings as it does even today. I am not particularly sentimental, but every now and then something sneaks past my defences and finds a breach into my heart. This is what happened with Becky's two questions. Where were you? Why didn't you come? I shall never forget them.

And I sometimes wonder if one day, on that great day of the Lord, I might face someone else who is lost and without hope - from China or India or Uganda or even from the streets of Sydney - someone who has never heard the good news that God loved us so much he sent his Son to die for us - someone who will look at me with a tears of pleading in their eyes, and ask me the same two things.

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## About Dr Barry Chant

Barry Chant is Senior Pastor of the Wesley International Congregation in Sydney, Australia. He is a regular speaker at church services, seminars, conferences and conventions. Hundreds of thousands of his books have been sold around the world. He has degrees in arts, theology and ministry, a diploma in education and a PhD in history. He was the initiator and former president of Tabor College, Australia.

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