

## TRAPPED IN THE OUTBACK

A true-life story of hope by Barry Chant

It's a frightening thing to be lost in the Outback. I know because it happened to my family and me.

The year was 1974. We were heading for a family holiday in the northern Flinders Ranges, a place of wild, steep, ragged hills, sharp-pointed grass and rambling, stony creek beds, guarded by towering river gums. There were five of us, myself, my wife Vanessa, our two school-age children Rebekah and Michael and our eight-month-old baby son Clinton

We first spent a weekend in the mining town of Broken Hill, where I spoke at a young, growing church. From there, we had planned to retrace our steps half way back along the highway to our home city of Adelaide, and then turn north again. But the map showed a minor route cutting across the desert which would save us hours of travel. We decided to take it.

It was a soft, quiet, sandy road, and we cruised along it enjoying the crisp country air, the squawking birds and the vast blue sky above. After a couple of hours, it sloped down into a wide, dry, creek bed, its ochre sand spread out before us like a newly-formed beach, although we could see where the track emerged on the other side. I dropped into a low gear and headed for it.

About half way over, the wheels began to spin. I revved the engine, gripped the steering wheel with clenched hands, as if that would somehow help, bit my lip and forged on. In the sinking sand, the trailer began to act like an anchor, dragging us back, but our second-hand Holden Station Sedan grunted on and we crawled out the other side.

'Wow! That was close!' said eleven-year-old Michael.

'A bit too close,' I responded. 'I hope we don't have to cross any more creeks like that.'

But the sun still shone. The breeze still blew. The birds still whistled. We were still in holiday mood. And so we drove on.

We made our way up a small rise from which the road proceeded down into a valley where there was an open gateway ahead of us. It should have been easy going. But what we saw was astonishing. I stopped the car and we all sat amazed at the scene before us. The whole valley was full of water. It spread out like a huge lake, shining and glimmering in the sunshine. It was almost to the top of the gateposts—where the track we were to follow simply disappeared under a metre of bright, cold, deep water.

There was plainly no way through.

'Looks like we'll have to turn back,' I said sadly. Then I thought about that dry creek bed. I was not sure we could cross it again. We were trapped between the two.

When we drove down to the water's edge we discovered what had happened. There was actually a great dam to our left which had overflowed into the valley. But the water had subsided somewhat and there seemed to be some kind of track along the top of the dam wall.

I am normally a cautious type, but when I get in the Outback, something changes, somehow, and I seem to be overcome by a wild, irrational desire to take risks. 'I think we could actually drive along up there,' I suggested. 'I'd like to have a go.' The kids were excited about the idea. Vanessa was not so sure. But we did.

It was an adventure. We had to follow an elevated track with deep water either side. If the earth crumbled or the dam wall gave way, we would slide into it. At least we wouldn't die of thirst! We all held our breath as I drove slowly and carefully, inching our way along, ready to stop at the slightest hint of danger. But in fact, the wall proved to be substantial and solid and led us safely through to the other side of the lake where another obviously disused track probed through the grass ahead of us. It was not the road on the map—just two wheel tracks through the bush—but there was nothing else.

It had been a good year. Where there was normally nothing but stony plains with stunted growth like the stubble on an old man's chin, the grass was waist-high in places. Occasional stands of scrubby acacia trees punctuated the landscape. And there was wild life everywhere. Kangaroos bounded and bounced away from us. An emu with a trail of chicks behind it strode away imperiously through the bush. Another tried to out-pace us and then ran into a fence again and again in a wild attempt to distance itself from us.

Hordes of brilliant wild flowers, including the impertinent black-and red Desert Pea, grew not only alongside the track but all over it. Protected plants they may be, but there was no way we could avoid crushing them as we journeyed on. It was obvious the track had not been used for a long time.

'Dad, let's stop and look at the flowers!' cried thirteen-year-old Becky. And so we did, we crawled among them like playful infants, trying to take photographs which would capture the moment for ever. We were very excited. In previous years we had never seen the Desert Pea like this. In fact, we had been lucky to see more than a stray, puny plant tucked away in the rocks.

We continued without difficulty until late afternoon. It became clear that we would not reach our destination that night and we began to think in terms of finding a camping spot. Then, unexpectedly, without any warning, we came to another wide, dry creek. My heart sank. We stopped and examined it. The sand was very deep and very soft. There was no way we could cross it. Frustratingly, just a few metres away, on the other side, the track continued firm and straight as ever.

There was an old wire fence running along the track to our left. We could not go that way. I walked further up the creek to the right. The terrain here was flat, with low grass and no trees and we could drive along it easily enough if there was a better place to cross. Finally, I found a spot where the creek narrowed and the banks were not too steep. It was worth a try.

I lined the car up in the best position, revved the motor, put my foot down and headed for the crossing. The wheels whirled, sand spraying behind them. The front of the vehicle reached the bank on the far side. I urged the old Holden onwards. But at that point the back wheels began to sink deeper into the sand. They spun like wild things, but the more they whirred the deeper they sank. Soon the body of the car itself was sitting on the sand. We were hopelessly stuck.

We tried digging beneath the wheels and stuffing grass and sticks under them. But no matter how deep we dug there was endless sand. And as soon as the motor started and the wheels turned, the bed of grass and sticks disintegrated and spun away like discarded rubbish.

'Maybe someone else will come along and help us,' said one of the children. They tore the sides off a cardboard carton and made two signs which read, 'Car stuck along creek. Please help.' A large arrow pointed in the right direction. They hiked back to the track and installed the signs on either side of the creek. It was a forlorn hope, but worth a try. For all I know those signs might be there still.

There was nothing for it now but to set up camp and wait till morning. We ate our evening meal around a small fire as the Outback night dropped on us like a great black canopy. Later, as we lay in our sleeping bags inside our large blue family tent, I began to worry about what might happen. We could be there for weeks before anyone found us. We had enough food for a few days and we knew where there was plenty of water, although it was a very long hike back to get it. Was it feasible to try to walk on ahead in the hope of finding someone to help? We really had no idea how far it was.

By now, the children were asleep but I was not. What if my foolishness resulted in us being stranded or even lost forever? I thought particularly of our baby son. What would become of him? We were a very long way from any other human being. A station owner at the beginning of the track knew we were making this journey, but there was no reason for him to come looking for us. No one at the end was expecting us. We could disappear for weeks before people at home would become concerned. If no other travellers took this track we would be very, very alone.

My fears were not helped by the stillness all around us. There was neither sound nor light anywhere. No animal. No bird. No moon. Just never-ending blackness all around. At night, the Outback can become very dark and eerily quiet. It is easy to feel afraid.

As I lay there, eyes open, looking blankly upwards, I heard a sound that filled me with alarm. It was the spattering of rain drops on the roof of our tent. This made things even worse. What if there was a torrential downpour? What if the creek began to flow? I remembered horror stories of flash floods and of water cascading down Outback creeks, taking everything in their path—rocks, boulders, branches of trees, and, yes, motor cars. What if our car, sitting right in the middle of the creek, was engulfed in a raging stream?

It was then, I remembered some basic truths. The first was that no matter what the problem, there is always hope. I thought of Paul's words of counsel to the young church at Philippi, 'Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus' (Philippians 4:6, 7).

I also remembered the wise advice of that writer of ancient times, 'Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up!... And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken' (Eccles. 4:9-12). It is always good to share the load.

I turned to Vanessa. 'Are you awake?'

'Yes,'

'I have to say I'm rather worried about this situation,' I confessed.

'Me, too.'

'I seem to have got us into a bit of a mess,' I continued.

'Well, I didn't try to stop you,' she said.

'I wish I knew what to do next.'

'Why don't we pray about it?' she suggested.

And so we did. Together, the two of us claimed the promise to the Philippians for ourselves. And it happened. We both felt a deep, settled peace and knew that all would be well, in spite of how bad things looked. For the first time for many hours, my heart was filled with hope.

Then I remembered one more thing. Problems always look a lot worse at night than they do in the morning. I would worry about what to do when I woke up.

Just as we were dropping off to sleep, I had an idea. Why not reverse the car out of the creek and try again some other way? I was just about to tell Vanessa my idea when she said, 'I've been thinking. Instead of trying to go forward, could you back the car out?' We both felt that God had spoken to us.

Next morning, when we awoke, we were delighted to see that the sun was shining. After breakfast I said to the kids, 'We've got an idea. But first, let's empty the trailer, unhitch it and try to drag it across by hand.'

So we did. We unloaded all our gear and, and while Clint sat in his pusher and tugged playfully at a suspended rattle, blissfully unaware of the dilemma we faced, Becky and Michael and I lugged it across the creek. Then we manhandled the trailer and to our surprise found it quite easy to shift. The rain had actually hardened the sand. What we had feared would be a problem turned out to be a blessing.

Now we were ready to try the idea Vanessa had thought of the previous night. We got our one shovel and our bare hands and we began to scrape sand away from behind the car. Because of the rain, once we dug down a few inches the ground became firmer. Then I got in the driver's seat and instead of trying to go forward, attempted to reverse the car back to where we had started. It worked. Soon it was on solid ground.

Now came the big task. 'Let's see if we can create a track across the creek.'

We dug further and cleared away as much of the soft sand as we could. It took two or three hours, but eventually we had actually made a way across the creek. Now we were ready to try to get the car across again. I gave the car a bit of a start, hit the sand fairly fast, but managed to keep going. Without the trailer, and with the hardened sand, there was enough momentum to carry us across and with loud shouts and hurrahs from the kids, and a great sense of relief for Vanessa and me, I made it to the other side.

It took a long time to dismantle the tent, collect the rest of our scattered belongings, lug them across the creek, and repack the car and the trailer, but eventually we were done. We forged on, following the track, wherever it would lead us. There were no more hazards. We continued for several hours, enjoying the wild scenery and the wild life.

At one point, to our great surprise, beside the track, we came across a telephone box, complete with old-fashioned wind-up telephone. We tried it, turning the handle furiously and waiting for an answer, but predictably, there was no result. Presumably it was a hangover from pre-radio and pre-motor cycle times, so station hands far from the homestead could still make contact in a hurry.

The country side began to change and large trees began to appear before us. And then, suddenly, through the trees we saw a house, smoke rising from its chimney. The kids cheered and with a rising sense of relief, we pressed on. As we drew near, a man appeared beneath the trees, Akubra hat hung low over his forehead and one thumb stuck in his belt.

We pulled up. 'Where in the dickens have you come from?' he demanded.

When we told him, he remarked, with some wonder, 'No one's been through there for a year. It's impassable.'

'Yes,' I replied. 'It almost is.'

It was after dark when we finally arrived at our destination, the camping ground at Arkaroola, in South Australia's far north. By that stage the exhaust pipe had broken and was dragging on the stony road, clattering and banging as we went. We didn't care. We just wanted to get there. And finally we did.

We had witnessed the triumph of resourcefulness over foolishness, of hope over despair. It was at Arkaroola that we encountered hordes of red back spiders. But that's another story.

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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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